Among Scrolls and Shadows

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In the Service of God

Dominic was born in the year 1615, in the Trastevere quarter of Rome, where the Tiber's gray waters curled past the crumbling stones of old empire and the voices of the poor rose with the smoke of morning fires. He was the third son of Matteo, a mason whose hands bore the dust of noble palaces he could never enter, and Lucia, a washerwoman whose back ached from scrubbing cold linens to keep hunger from the door. They lived in a single dark room above a cobbler's shop, the walls thin and the floor uneven, where the sounds of the city seeped in at every hour.

His brothers were boys of muscle and trade—one hauling sacks through the Campo de' Fiori, the other slapping mortar onto the facades of half-built villas. But Dominic was not like them. From the time he could walk, he lingered in the shadowed chapels of Santa Maria in Trastevere, staring at the painted saints and the flickering candles as if they whispered secrets no one else could hear. He did not run through the alleys or fight for scraps; instead, he sat quietly through Mass long after others had left, his eyes fixed on the altar as though listening to something deeper than the priest's voice.

It was the parish priest who noticed the boy's stillness, and more than that, his mind. Dominic remembered every line of Scripture he heard and recited Latin psalms with a calm, clear voice that did not falter. The old man taught him to read from the missal, and though the boy had never held a book before, he treated it like a sacred object. By the time he was twelve, he was helping light the altar candles, sweeping the nave, and ringing the bell for the Angelus. His hands knew the rhythm of prayer and dust.

He had no tutors, no fine vestments, no promise of a scholar's future, but the Church noticed. A wandering friar heard him chant verses by heart and, impressed, arranged a place for him in a small seminary school. The tuition was paid partly from parish alms, partly by Vatican stipends for poor boys of promise. There, Dominic labored with humble precision. He was not brilliant, nor favored by instructors, but he was steadfast. He memorized, he prayed, and he served. While others dreamed of pulpits and papal favor, he longed only to serve in quiet sanctuaries, far from ambition.

By his early twenties, Dominic had taken minor orders and been received as a monk—not into some grand monastery, but into the quiet machinery of the Vatican itself. His cell stood in the shadow of St. Peter's Basilica, a bare chamber of stone with a cot, a crucifix, and a single shelf holding his worn breviary and two borrowed books. His life moved in rhythms as old as the Church: morning prayer in the echoing choir, humble meals at a common table, and small tasks that touched the fringes of power.

He was the one who lit candles in side chapels, carried messages between minor offices of the Curia, wiped the dust from saints' relics, and helped unfurl carpets before papal ceremonies. When pilgrims arrived, he moved quietly among them. When dignitaries passed, he was the one holding the incense or sweeping their path. No one remembered his name, but

Dominic saw everything. He learned which doors bore signs no monk should open, which guards lingered longer than duty required, which letters arrived unsealed though they should not have been touched.

And in his silence, he listened. Whispers passed through corridors like wind through cloisters—rumors of heresy trials, names spoken only once, and the rustle of locked drawers late at night. He did not seek these things, yet they drifted to him like ash in a censer. There were chapels no one entered after dark. There were rooms in the Apostolic Palace that no monk ever cleaned. And in the underground halls beneath the basilica—where tombs of popes rested beside forgotten relics—he sometimes heard the soft scurry of footsteps when he was sure he was alone.

Dominic asked no questions, and no one asked questions of him. He was just another brown-robed brother tending to oil lamps. But it was in this stillness, in this life of quiet routine, that he became the most dangerous kind of witness: the one no one notices, who sees everything.

The morning bell tolled before the sky had begun to pale, a deep, hollow sound that rolled across the Vatican walls and stirred the quiet halls. Dominic rose without complaint. His back was stiff from the thin cot and the cold stone floor beneath it, but his hands moved with habitual grace. He dipped his fingers in the small basin beside the door, made the sign of the cross, and murmured a psalm before drawing his robe close around him. The corridors outside his cell were still wrapped in a hush, save for the distant shuffling of other brothers answering the bell's summons.

By candlelight, the monks gathered in the choir stalls of St. Peter's, their voices lifting into the vastness beneath Michelangelo's dome. The basilica, though cold in the early hours, glowed faintly with the breath of wax and gold. Dominic sang the Matins and Lauds with steady rhythm, not the strongest voice, but unfaltering. The marble saints gazed down in silence, their painted eyes eternal. This was the part of the day he cherished most: the moment before the Vatican stirred with footsteps and orders, when prayer was the only language spoken.

After the final chant, he made his way to the sacristy, where the first of his tasks began. A small bundle of keys hung from his belt, and he used them to enter the side chapels one by one, checking the oil in the hanging lamps. Some had gone out during the night, and he replenished them from a pewter flask he carried, the scent of blessed oil clinging to his hands. In the Chapel of St. Sebastian, he replaced a candle whose wick had drowned in wax. In the Chapel of the Pietà, he paused a moment before the sculpture, brushing dust from the Virgin's robe as though she were real, and whispered a single prayer beneath his breath.

Next came errands. A clerk in the Curia's lower offices handed him a sealed list of names—changes to the choir schedule for the week—and Dominic carried it down the colonnade to the cantor's office. He exchanged quiet greetings with other brothers in passing, never lingering long. He preferred the silent corridors and shadowed corners where no one expected more than a nod. Along the way, he passed a servant polishing a bronze cherub, a guard half-

asleep at his post, and a cook hauling crates of fish toward the papal kitchens. The Vatican was awake now, groaning to life like some great cathedral clock.

By midday, Dominic took his place at the long refectory table with the other monks and minor clerks. The meal was humble: beans, dark bread, and a strip of dried cod soaked in vinegar. Conversation was low, mostly remarks about the weather or the health of a brother. Dominic spoke little. He watched the sunlight fall through the stained windows onto the stone walls, watched how it painted the faces of his brothers with gold. He chewed slowly, thinking of a passage from Augustine he had read the night before, and wondering how many truths in the world lived hidden beneath the surface of ordinary things.

After the meal came a brief hour of reading. In his spare time, Dominic made use of a dusty alcove near the library annex—no grand shelves or rare manuscripts, but enough to borrow a volume of sermons or a commentary on the Epistles. Today, he returned to a leather-bound book of early Church martyrs, its pages thin and fragile. He read about Bishop Polycarp's final prayer before the fire was lit, about a girl named Agnes who would not renounce her faith even under threat of the sword. He read not for drama or escape, but for understanding. He saw in their lives the same quiet obedience he tried to offer in his own.

Before Vespers, he swept the sacristy and arranged the candles for the evening Mass. When a new reliquary was delivered—said to contain a bone fragment of St. Lawrence—he was called to help place it beneath the altar of a lesser chapel. He lifted it carefully, noting the gold filigree, the Latin inscription etched along the base. It would be displayed tomorrow, and pilgrims would kneel before it in reverence. He, who had set it there, would return to his cot without mention.

As twilight bled into the high windows of the basilica, the monks gathered once more in prayer. Dominic's voice joined theirs, rising and falling like breath. And when night came and the candles were snuffed, he returned to his cell, weary but content. He read a few more pages by lamplight, then closed the book, folded his hands, and whispered the words of Compline.

In the silence that followed, he lay in bed and listened to the distant sounds—the wind through the colonnades, the creak of wood in the old beams, and, once, the faint steps of someone moving where no steps should be at that hour. He did not rise to follow. Not yet.

Tomorrow would come, and with it the rhythm of a life lived in the shadows of saints.

The basilica was already breathing with quiet footsteps by the time Dominic stepped into the side corridor near the Chapel of St. Petronilla. The air smelled of wax and old incense, and the mosaic floors were cool beneath his sandaled feet. At the end of the corridor, Brother Salvatore Neri sat on a low stool with a bent spine and a jug of watered wine between his feet. His smoke-blackened hands were busy scraping residue from a brass candlestick, muttering as he worked.

“They burn the tall ones like we grow them on fig trees,” he grumbled without looking up. “No sense in these cardinals. Always light and never pray. I tell you, Dominic, if wax were gold, the Church would be broke by Pentecost.”

Dominic offered a half-smile and knelt to help. “The Feast of the Assumption is coming. They’ll want more candles lit than ever.”

Salvatore snorted and wiped his forehead with the back of his wrist. “Let them light themselves on fire, then. Might burn some pride off.” He glanced sideways at Dominic. “You heard about the Spanish Jesuit—Villalobos? He’s asking questions. Real questions.”

Dominic didn’t answer. He focused on smoothing the wick of a half-burnt taper, then rose and tucked it into the basket he carried. The less said, the better.

From behind them came the patter of hurried steps. Brother Enzo Bartoli appeared, winded and grinning, a bundle of notes clutched in his fist.

“I saw the French envoy leave the Curia fuming like a chimney. Some argument with Cardinal Orsini. Might’ve been over Spain, or some letter the pope refused to sign. Either way, it’s getting warm in those halls.”

Salvatore groaned. “Is there ever a day you bring good news, boy?”

“Only when you stop drinking before Vespers,” Enzo replied, slipping a folded note into Dominic’s basket. “That one goes to Sister Caterina, embroidery request for the bishop’s new cope. She likes you best, so you’ll deliver it.”

Dominic nodded, adjusting the leather strap of the basket on his shoulder. “I’ll stop by after the noon prayer.”

“Careful,” Enzo said, winking. “She had another vision last night. Said the basilica would crack open like an egg and spill secrets.”

“She says that every month,” Salvatore muttered.

“And every month she’s not entirely wrong,” added a soft voice from behind a nearby column.

Brother Gabriele Monti emerged with his broom in hand, sleeves rolled to his elbows. His robes were dust-streaked from sweeping the apse. He looked at the others mildly, his expression unreadable.

“I saw Canon Lancellotti walking out of the south crypt at dawn,” he said quietly. “He looked... shaken.”

Salvatore waved a hand. “Everyone looks shaken coming out of that place.”

“But he was alone,” Gabriele insisted. “And I saw him holding something—small, wrapped in linen.”

Enzo's eyes widened. "Relic?"

"Document, maybe," Gabriele replied, his voice lowering. "Something old. He tucked it under his vestment like it burned."

Dominic said nothing, but a faint chill touched the back of his neck. He had passed that same crypt an hour before. The lamps were still burning then.

From the far end of the corridor came a sharp whistle—the kind used only by Brother Luca, the sacristan's assistant. Dominic stood and gathered his things.

"That's the call for candlesticks. Evening Mass preparations," he said. "Salvatore, will you join?"

The older monk groaned, stretched his legs with effort, and stood with a grunt. "My knees say no, but my soul says the sacristan will shout if I don't."

Enzo was already hurrying off in another direction. "If anyone asks, I'm in the archives—not listening."

As the others scattered to their tasks, Dominic lingered for a moment beneath the arch, watching them go. These were the quiet voices of the Vatican's lungs—the men who carried keys and candles, broom and bread, whispers and warnings. They were never called into the papal chambers. They did not dine with princes or debate with cardinals. But between the pillars of saints and the corridors of power, they moved like threads in a hidden tapestry.

And Dominic, as always, walked somewhere between them—quiet, listening, remembering.

The hour of his duties passed, Dominic returned to his chamber—bare stone walls and a single wooden crucifix above the cot where he slept. Sunlight crept through the narrow window, casting a pale beam across the floor, and dust hung like incense in the stillness. He knelt before the cross and folded his hands, his fingers worn smooth from years of wax and linen. A whisper of Latin rose from his lips, slow and deliberate.

"*Domine, dirige me in veritate tua, et doce me: quia tu es Deus salutaris meus, et te sustinui tota die.*"
Lord, lead me in Thy truth, and teach me: for Thou art the God of my salvation; on Thee do I wait all the day.
—Psalm 25:5

He paused, his brow low, and continued in quiet prayer.

"*Ad te levavi oculos meos, qui habitas in cælis. Ecce sicut oculi servorum in manibus dominorum suorum…*"
Unto Thee lift I up mine eyes, O Thou that dwellest in the heavens. Behold, as the eyes of servants look unto the hand of their masters…
—Psalm 123:1–2

Silence held his breath. No stir from the halls outside, only the murmur of prayer lingering like smoke in the corners. He stayed long after the words ceased, then rose slowly, brushing dust from his knees.

With no errands until late afternoon, Dominic slipped through the basilica's quieter wings toward the library. The Vatican Library was no grand cathedral to most, but to him it was as sacred as any chapel. Inside, the scent of vellum and oil ink clung to the air, and the windows let in just enough light to dance across wooden desks and iron-bound shelves.

He greeted the scribe at the front desk with a quiet nod and made his way to a corner where older volumes were shelved—those too obscure or cracked with age to interest even the eager seminarians. Today, he pulled down a folio bound in fading green leather: *De Civitate Dei* by Augustine of Hippo, its Latin script curled in ornate hand. He had read it once before in pieces, but now he studied it slowly, line by line, letting the phrases settle in his mind like sediment in water.

"The city of man shall fall, but the city of God is eternal," he murmured aloud, then paused at a marginal note in red ink left by some long-forgotten copyist: *Ubi Roma cadit, ibi oritur Ecclesia vera.*
Where Rome falls, there the true Church rises.

He frowned at the note, uncertain if it was reverent or rebellious.

Time passed quietly. The shuffle of sandals, the soft clink of inkpots. Then, the familiar voice of Brother Raimondo Corsi broke the quiet.

"You're reading the bishop of Hippo again, Brother Dominic?" the older monk said with a smile as he stepped between the shelves, arms already filled with books. "You'll turn into a North African if you keep that up."

Dominic smiled faintly. "Better a scholar in Carthage than a fool in Rome."

Raimondo chuckled and dropped the books—mostly worn volumes of patristic writings and apocryphal texts—onto the table beside Dominic.

"You know," he said, lowering himself onto the bench with a creak of knees, "there was a time when the Caesars used to sacrifice bulls on this very hill."

Dominic tilted his head. "Capitoline Hill, not Vatican."

Raimondo shook his finger. "Ah, that's the common version. But before Constantine, before Peter's bones were buried in this earth, this ground held another temple—dedicated to Cybele, the mother of gods. Her priests walked barefoot, whipped themselves bloody in ecstasy. And now we light candles and sweep marble."

Dominic raised a brow. "You sound like a pagan yourself."

“History is older than heresy,” Raimondo said with a grin. “Do you know the Tiber once changed course, centuries ago? During a flood, it washed over the low hills and uncovered an old crypt beneath what is now the western wall of the basilica. They say inside were bones and coins from the time of Augustus. Some even claimed there were scrolls—older than Christ—sealed in lead tubes.”

Dominic leaned forward, intrigued. “What happened to them?”

“Gone,” Raimondo shrugged. “The flood receded, and the crypt was sealed. But it makes you wonder, doesn’t it? How many Romes lie buried under this one? How many truths swallowed by time?”

Dominic traced the edge of the folio before him, his voice soft. “And how many truths were buried deliberately?”

At that, Raimondo gave him a long look—measured, curious.

“Careful with questions like that, brother,” he said finally, rising with his books. “There are those in these halls who consider curiosity a sin more dangerous than pride.”

As he walked away to a shelf, Dominic sat still for a moment, watching the dust settle where Raimondo had stood. Then he turned back to his book, though his eyes lingered longer on the margin than on the page itself.

The scrape of worn soles echoed softly as Brother Raimondo returned from the far shelf, a thick volume cradled in his hands like a relic. He set it down on the table beside Dominic with gentle care, the spine creaking under age. The cover was stamped with a Latin title, dulled by time: *Apologia pro Christianis* by Justin Martyr.

“A fine companion to your Augustine,” Raimondo said as he lowered himself onto the bench. “Written nearly a century earlier. Justin wrote it in Rome, you know—around the year 150. Addressed to the emperor himself, no less.”

Dominic looked over the book, tracing the faded lettering with a reverent fingertip. “I’ve heard the name. But I haven’t read him.”

“Few have. But he’s one of the first who tried to defend the faith not with swords or miracles, but with reason,” Raimondo said, opening the book and turning to a passage marked with a ribbon. “He stood before pagan rulers and argued that Christians were not enemies of the state. That they worshipped not many gods, but one Logos—truth, reason, made flesh.”

Dominic leaned slightly closer, eyes narrowing with interest. “He speaks of Christ?”

“Always,” Raimondo said with a nod. “To Justin, Christ was the very logic by which the world was created. Not just a teacher, or a martyr, but the living Word—what Plato might have called the perfect Form, clothed in flesh.”

Dominic looked thoughtful. “It’s strange to think of Christ in philosophical terms. I’ve always seen Him as the suffering servant. The Lamb.”

“And rightly so,” Raimondo replied. “But in those early centuries, there were many who saw Him in other lights. To some, He was a secret revealer. To others, a divine messenger sent to wake the soul from illusion. Even the apostles struggled to agree, it seems. And the Church… well, it took time to decide what was doctrine and what was danger.”

Dominic frowned faintly. “That sounds perilously close to heresy.”

“It was perilously close to history,” Raimondo said gently, without mockery. “You know, Dominic, long before the Church settled its canon—before Jerome translated the Vulgate, before councils debated the Epistles—there was a man named Marcion of Sinope.”

The name stirred no memory. Dominic shook his head. “I don’t know it.”

“No reason you should,” Raimondo said, his tone casual but laced with purpose. “He lived in the second century. A wealthy shipowner’s son. Came to Rome, began preaching—and more importantly, compiling. He made what is considered the first Christian canon. A set of texts he believed were the true teachings of Christ, without the weight of Jewish law.”

Dominic’s brow furrowed. “Before the Church had its Bible?”

“Decades before,” Raimondo said, tilting the book slightly toward him. “His version was… trimmed, yes. But it forced the early Church to respond. It was Marcion who pushed the bishops to ask: which writings are true? Which letters holy? Without his provocation, we might still be arguing.”

He said it as though it were a simple footnote, a curiosity of history. But Dominic could feel the ripple beneath the words. He watched Raimondo closely.

“Why do you bring him up?”

Raimondo shrugged, flipping through the pages of *Apologia* as though in search of nothing in particular. “Because history is a shadow that moves. Most of us walk forward and only feel it behind us. But some… some look back and see the outline of things yet unfinished. I’ve always found it helpful to know what others believed before the walls were built around belief.”

He let the words hang for a moment, then closed the book gently.

“Marcion is not in the good books, of course. But one cannot understand the house without seeing the foundations. That's all.”

Dominic nodded slowly, still uncertain what to make of it. “I suppose there's value in knowing the shape of the past. Even the broken parts.”

Raimondo gave him a smile—soft, almost approving. “Exactly. And the past is never silent, brother. It whispers through old pages and forgotten names. We must only learn to listen.”

Then, without pressing further, Raimondo stood, gathering the book under his arm.

“I’ll return this to the desk. You stay and finish your chapter. Augustine still waits for you.”

Dominic watched him go, his eyes lingering not on Raimondo, but on the space he left behind. The name Marcion echoed in his mind like a note struck softly in an empty chapel—faint, but not forgotten. He turned back to *De Civitate Dei.*

The words of Augustine filled Dominic’s mind like incense, rising in slow, heavy curls of thought.

“*Duae sunt quaedam civitates, quarum est una Dei, altera huius mundi...*”
There are two cities, one of God and the other of this world...

He read slowly, lips barely moving as he followed the lines with his finger.

“The earthly city glories in itself, the heavenly city glories in the Lord. That seeks glory from men, this seeks the testimony of conscience. That lifts up its head in its own glory, this says to its God: ‘Thou art my glory, and the lifter up of mine head.’”

Dominic closed his eyes for a moment. Augustine’s words were not merely theological; they were a warning. Pride vs humility, earth vs spirit, flesh vs faith. As he turned another page, the leather creaked softly beneath his hands. The book was a living thing in this quiet room.

But after an hour more of reading, the letters began to blur. He paused, closed the volume with reverent care, and carried it back to its place among the shelves. His mind still stirred with the imagery—cities at war, the righteous in exile, the hidden church inside the false.

Leaving the hush of the library, Dominic stepped into the cooler air of the lower basilica and began his descent toward the Vatican Grottoes. Few monks wandered there outside of feast days, but to him it was a place of strange peace. The silence beneath the weight of saints’ bones was deeper, more honest, than anywhere above.

Near the entrance, he saw her—Sister Caterina Farnese. Clad in a plain veil and dark robes, she stood waiting with a small book in her hand and a serene look in her eyes, as though she had already foreseen his coming.

“You came again,” she said softly, turning to fall in step beside him.

“I always do,” Dominic replied. “These stones have voices. They remember things.”

She smiled gently. “Yes. And sometimes, if you are still enough, they remember aloud.”

Together they passed tombs of popes and forgotten martyrs, the dim lamplight catching gilded Latin inscriptions and glimmering mosaics long faded by time. At last they stopped before a sarcophagus of deep red stone, darker than the rest. Its presence seemed to command the entire niche.

“This one,” Caterina said, “belonged to Hadrian the Fourth. Nicholas Breakspear. The only Englishman to ever sit on Peter’s throne.”

Dominic examined the fine grain of the granite, his hand hovering just above it. “It doesn’t look medieval.”

“It isn’t,” Caterina said, lowering her voice. “The sarcophagus was carved from Egyptian granite in the third century after Christ. It once held a pagan. The iron clamps that sealed it are still visible along the sides.”

Dominic looked at her, brow furrowed. “And they buried a pope in it?”

“He died in Anagni in 1159. They called this sarcophagus *optima concha*—the most beautiful shell. It was placed near the triumphal arch, beside the tomb of Eugenius III. When the basilica was rebuilt, it was moved, rediscovered, and finally brought here in 1606.”

Caterina stepped forward and pointed toward the inscription on the wall.

“See? The Norwegian Society placed that plaque centuries later. Hadrian was sent to Norway in 1152. He resolved disputes, founded the Bishopric of Nidaros. When he became pope, he made sure Norwegians could come to Rome safely. This tomb is not just a grave. It’s a story.”

Dominic’s eyes traced the sculpted images. A carved festoon stretched across the front, and at its center, the horned skull of a bull—*a bucranium*. Two rosettes adorned the sides, and on the rounded lid rested the unmistakable faces of Medusa, hair of serpents curling, mouths parted in silent screams. Above them, the stone bore the name: HADRIANVS PAPA IIII.

He felt a cold flutter rise in his chest.

“Why would a pope be buried beneath symbols like this?” he asked. “Medusas? That’s... pagan. I’ve read they ward off spirits, but also that they invite them.”

Caterina didn’t answer at once. She stared at the sarcophagus, her eyes distant.

“This was not made for a pope,” she said slowly. “It was made for someone else, long ago—when the Empire still bowed to false gods. The Church reused many things in those days. Temples became churches. Columns and tombs were carried across centuries like relics themselves.”

“But this,” Dominic whispered, “it feels wrong.”

Caterina looked at him now, her gaze strangely sharp.

“What feels wrong is sometimes what points to a hidden truth. Rome is built on layers, Dominic. Bones upon bones, altar upon altar. We live on the skin of history, but sometimes it cracks. Sometimes what lies beneath it... stirs.”

Her voice had taken on the same unsettling softness that Dominic had heard in her prayers. The kind that made younger monks whisper of visions. Of spirits.

“Have you seen anything here?” he asked carefully. “Visions?”

She smiled again, this time sadder.

“I see what I must. But even I do not always understand it. Sometimes it is light. Sometimes it is shadow. Sometimes the two are the same.”

They stood in silence for a while. Dominic’s gaze returned to the Medusa heads. Symbols of fear, of transformation, of things turned to stone by terrible truths.

Caterina’s voice returned, hushed.

“Would it surprise you to learn, brother, that some say even saints once feared the gods they later denounced? That the line between heresy and revelation was once no thicker than a whisper?”

He looked at her, uncertain.

“And what do you believe?”

She tilted her head. “I believe truth waits in strange places. Even in a tomb that once held demons but now holds a pope.”

Then she turned and walked back into the gloom, her veil brushing the walls.

Dominic remained. The air around the sarcophagus felt stiller than before. He whispered a prayer under his breath, not from fear—but to remember who he was, and who he served.

The flicker of Caterina’s veil disappeared around the curve of a low archway, and Dominic’s steps quickened. A strange stirring followed him now—not fear, not awe, but a pull, like the slow rising of tide against stone. He caught up to her just as she paused beneath a carved lintel, her face turned slightly toward a low-lit corridor lined with ancient marble.

“Wait,” Dominic said softly. “Sister Caterina… may I ask more?”

She turned to him with calm patience, as if she had already known he would follow. Her eyes, pale and steady, studied him without judgment.

“I thought you might.”

They stood now near the Clementine Chapel. Its solemn threshold glowed faintly with the warmth of oil lamps lit before dawn, still flickering in the dim hours of late afternoon. The scent of ancient dust and candle smoke hung thick in the air.

Caterina stepped slowly toward the center of the peribolos and gestured with one hand.

“This,” she said, “is the heart of it. The Clementine Chapel. Jewel of the Vatican Grottoes. Precious guardian of the Apostle’s grave.”

Dominic looked around in silence, the soft gleam of gold leaf and colored marble catching his eye from the walls and columns. Every inch of the chamber breathed reverence, yet beneath it, something older seemed to press outward.

Caterina continued, her voice barely above a whisper.

“The center of this room—beneath your feet—is the *subterranea Confessio*, built in the sixth century by Pope Pelagius II and Saint Gregory the Great. In their time, this was the closest the faithful could come to Peter’s resting place.”

She motioned toward the back of the chamber, where a small gilded gate shielded the altar.

“Behind there lies the *Memoria Petri*, the original Constantinian monument. Two marble slabs, separated by porphyry strips, rest atop Peter’s bones. That altar above it—Calixtus II built it, and it was consecrated in 1123. Later popes expanded this chapel, raised it, decorated it. It became the place for oaths, reconciliations, the blessing of archbishops’ Pallia. Even now, plenary indulgence can be granted here—for the souls of the dead.”

Dominic gazed silently at the gilded grid behind the altar. The light shimmered like sunlight through water, golden and shifting, and yet something felt… weighted.

“Sister…” he said, hesitant. “Why is the chapel shaped like that?”

“Like what?” she asked.

He stepped closer, pointing toward the outline of the chamber—long central aisle, two short arms near the back.

“An upside-down cross,” he said, voice lower now. “I know they say Peter was crucified that way, but… isn’t that symbol unholy now? First the Medusas. Then the horned skull. Now a reversed cross above the tomb of the Apostle?”

For a moment, she said nothing. Then she stepped slowly into the center of the room and turned to face him, hands folded before her.

“It is true,” she said calmly. “Peter, according to tradition, was crucified in Rome—upside down. By his own request. He said he was not worthy to die as Christ did. And so the cross, reversed, became *his* sign. Not of mockery, but of humility.”

Dominic’s brow furrowed. “But now… it means something else. The world sees it as a symbol of darkness.”

Caterina nodded slowly. “Because symbols shift. Meaning bends. A thing once holy can be twisted in another age, just as a thing feared can be sanctified.”

She took a few slow steps toward the altar and laid her hand gently on the marble.

“Even this stone. Once it marked the grave of a condemned criminal. Then an apostle. Then a saint. Then a prince of the Church. And yet it has not changed—only what we believe about it has.”

Dominic looked again at the shape of the room, then at the ancient slabs behind the grid. The thought began to bloom uncomfortably in his mind—quiet, but sharp.

“All my life,” he murmured, “I was told the Church stood like a pillar on the rock of truth. Solid. Pure. But these symbols… they come from places I was taught to fear.”

Caterina looked at him—not scolding, nor consoling.

“Then perhaps,” she said gently, “you were taught to fear the wrong things.”

He looked at her sharply.

“Do you mean the Church lied?”

“No,” she replied, her voice steady. “But I mean that the Church is built not only of what is spoken—but also what is left unsaid.”

Dominic felt a chill pass through him—not from cold, but from the growing weight of questions that had no easy answer. Yet for the first time, he did not turn away from them.

“Why are you telling me this?” he asked.

Caterina’s eyes softened. “Because you listen. And because you read. And because you stood before a tomb with Medusas and did not run. You only asked.”

She stepped past him now, walking quietly back toward the narrow passage that led to the outer halls. But as she passed, she laid one hand lightly on his sleeve.

“Keep asking, Brother Dominic,” she whispered. “That is the only way truth can breathe.”

And then she was gone.

He remained in the chapel long after she had vanished, standing beside the altar, beneath the weight of history and stone. The upside-down cross pressed itself into his mind—no longer simply a relic of martyrdom, but a mark of reversal, of mystery, of something forgotten or hidden.

And for the first time, he began to wonder what else lay beneath the surface of what he had always believed.

Dominic’s footsteps echoed softly down the stone corridor as he moved deeper through the winding heart of the Grottoes. The air grew cooler, older. He passed beneath low vaults and between stone columns, until the scent of wax and damp marble gave way to a faint floral sweetness—like the memory of incense long extinguished.

He had been here before, though not often. The Chapel of the Madonna of the Bocciata held a strange weight. Not the oppressive kind that filled some tombs, nor the solemnity of Peter's sepulcher—but something sadder. A kind of ache preserved in stone and paint.

He stepped into the chapel and bowed his head instinctively.

On the wall above the altar, framed by Cosmatesque marble, was the fresco—weathered, yet alive with the depth of centuries. The Virgin's face, once serene, bore the faint trace of a wound. Her left cheek was bruised, her gaze still unshaken. The Christ Child rested in her arms, His hand raised in blessing, eyes downward toward a figure now missing but once known.

Dominic stood in silence, thoughts rising like voices beneath the stone.

He had read the tale. Heard the legend whispered in the refectory by candlelight years ago. The Madonna della Bocciata—so called because of the swelling on her cheek. A drunken soldier, bitter at losing a game of bowls, had hurled a stone at the fresco out of blasphemous rage. And the Virgin, it was said, had bled.

He remembered the details now as if reciting them from a book in his mind. The fresco painted by Pietro Cavallini or one of his disciples in the late thirteenth century. First housed in the old portico between the Ravenna Door and the Door of the Dead. Moved in 1574 to preserve it. Rediscovered, relocated, renamed. Given honor despite the scar it bore.

The Church is pure, he thought, *but why elevate a desecrated image? Why hold up a wound?*

His gaze fell to the stones set into the wall beside the altar—smooth, worn to a shine by centuries of faithful hands. These were the very stones, tradition claimed, upon which the Virgin's blood had fallen. The iron grate that protected them seemed more like a reliquary than a defense.

He knelt on the cold floor, hands clasped, and whispered softly:

"*Benedicta tu in mulieribus, et benedictus fructus ventris tui.*
Holy Mary, blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb."

His voice trembled as he continued.

"*Behold thy servant, O Mother. Cover me in your mantle, bruised though it may be. For even the wounded still protect. Even the scorned still bless.*"

He made the sign of the cross, then rose with a sigh. The wound upon the Virgin's face lingered in his thoughts, quiet and unresolved.

The Grottoes gave way to warmth as he climbed the last steps toward the sunlit corridors above. The hour was late; the afternoon bell had rung not long ago. He turned down the familiar hall that led to the dining chamber—plain, vaulted, filled with the muted clatter of bowls and murmured prayer.

He took his seat at the long wooden table beside Brother Enzo, who had already dipped his spoon into a bowl of warm porridge.

“You look as though you’ve seen a ghost,” Enzo said, glancing sideways.

“Not a ghost,” Dominic replied. “A painting.”

“Ah,” Brother Salvatore muttered from across the table, “he’s been down to the Bocciata again. Careful, or you’ll come back seeing blood on stones and saints in doorways.”

Enzo chuckled. “You laugh, Salvatore, but Sister Caterina says that image still weeps at night.”

Salvatore scoffed, tearing a piece of bread. “That nun sees too much for her own good.”

Caterina herself sat farther down the table, her gaze low, spoon moving gently through her bowl. As if hearing them, she looked up just once, and her eyes met Dominic’s with an unreadable calm.

Dominic dipped his bread into the watered broth and chewed slowly.

“Some wounds,” he said aloud, more to himself than anyone else, “are not meant to heal. They remain to be remembered.”

The table quieted briefly at that. Only the sound of chewing and distant footfalls remained.

Then Salvatore grunted, “Well, I still say the bread’s too hard, and the porridge too thin. The only miracle here would be a second portion.”

Laughter broke out quietly, and the moment passed. But Dominic ate in silence, the image of the wounded Madonna etched in his mind like a scar on sacred stone.

The warm scent of duck drifted into Dominic’s nostrils, rich and sweet, carried on the steam rising from the gilded plate placed before Father Lodovico Carafa. The Auditor of the Rota—cloaked in deep crimson, his rings catching the light—settled himself at the head of the table with the air of a prince seated among peasants. His plate bore roasted duck breast glazed in wine, boiled potatoes drizzled with olive oil, and soft vegetables seasoned with herbs.

Around him, the monks and nuns continued to spoon their cold porridge and chew stale bread without complaint. Dominic felt his stomach contract with quiet hunger, but he forced himself to chew slowly, as though savoring each bland mouthful. The fat from the duck glistened on Lodovico’s lips as he tore at the flesh, grease running down his chin and darkening the collar of his robe. His eyes—sharp and gray—scanned the table like a hawk circling over sheep.

Without warning, his voice rose above the soft clatter of bowls and cups.

“Acts, chapter five,” he said, not lifting his head. “Ananias and Sapphira.”

The hall fell still. He chewed once, swallowed audibly, then continued.

“A man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property. And with her full knowledge, he kept back a portion of the money. But the rest he brought and laid at the feet of the apostles, pretending it was the whole of it.”

His fork clinked softly as he gestured with it.

“Peter saw through it. *‘How is it,’* he said, *‘that Satan has filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?’* Not to men—*to God.*”

Lodovico paused to wipe duck grease from his fingers with a fine cloth napkin. The silence of the refectory grew deeper.

“And when Ananias heard these words… *he fell down and died.* Just like that. Struck dead not for theft, but for deceit. For presenting a lie as holy offering.”

He stared now at the long table, his gaze lingering a moment too long on each face.

“Three hours later,” he went on, “his wife came. Not knowing her husband was already buried. She repeated the same lie. *‘Yes, this is the price.’* But Peter said, *‘How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord?’* And she too fell dead at his feet.”

He leaned back, his voice quieter now, but cold.

“Let all remember: it was not their poverty that condemned them, nor even their hesitation. It was the lie. The betrayal wrapped in piety.”

He set down his fork. The duck was finished.

“Better to speak truth and be poor,” he said, rising from his seat with a swift motion, “than to prosper through deceit and die with a lie on your lips.”

Without another word, Father Lodovico turned and strode from the hall, the crimson hem of his robe trailing behind him like the flame of judgment.

The room remained hushed until the echo of his steps had faded. Then, as though surfacing from deep water, a few murmurs returned, quiet as birdsong.

Enzo leaned toward Dominic, whispering, “Is it lying if the duck tastes better when he eats it?”

Dominic did not smile. The passage had struck him too deeply. He finished his porridge and set his spoon down as the bell rang for the after-meal prayer.

All those seated rose, hands folded in reverence, and recited together:

“*We thank You, Lord, for the bread of this day. For the hands that prepared it, for the strength to receive it. May we walk in truth, and not in pretense; may our lips speak plainly before men and before God. Let no falsehood rise from our hearts, lest we be found wanting. In Your mercy, sustain us in both body and soul. Amen.*”

The monks, nuns, and lay staff quietly filed out, heading toward their afternoon duties—the library, the laundry, the garden, the chapel. The benches emptied, the bowls were gathered.

But Dominic remained seated for a while, staring at the wooden grain of the table before him.

He lowered his eyes and recited in his mind:

"*Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts.*
And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."
—Psalm 139:23–24

He closed his eyes. He was not Ananias. He had no secret offering, no stolen coin. And yet… the doubts in his heart, the questions, the shadows—they had begun to stir like something alive.

May I lie neither to men nor to You, Lord, he prayed in silence. *Not even with silence itself.*

The refectory had grown quiet again, echoing now only with the low scuff of sandals and the clink of bowls being cleared. Dominic remained on the long bench, his thoughts drifting between the teaching of Lodovico and the solemn face of the wounded Madonna. The weight of his inner silence sat heavily in his chest, until the calm was broken by a sudden sharp rustle of cloth.

Fra Tommaso Benedetti entered, his step brisk, jaw set in permanent determination. The novice monk carried his meal wrapped in clean linen, a folded piece of bread tucked carefully inside. Without waiting for invitation, he sat next to Dominic and began unwrapping the bundle. The crust cracked under his fingers.

"Mmm," he muttered, pouring water into his tin cup. "Still warm."

He bit into the bread with loud, eager munching, as though devotion were measured in volume. Then, between chews, he glanced sideways at Dominic.

"Did you deliver the candles to Sant' Anna dei Palafrenieri this morning?"

Dominic's shoulders tensed, but his tone remained even. "Yes."

Tommaso nodded curtly, taking another large bite.

"Good. They were expecting them early. I was told someone forgot them last week."

Dominic didn't reply. He stared at the grain of the table, unwilling to take the bait.

Tommaso swallowed with difficulty, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, then leaned forward.

"I always say, it is a blessing to serve under Pope Urban. A lion of God, a true shepherd. Rome is golden because of him. We are fortunate beyond reckoning to live in his time."

Dominic offered a nod, though with restraint. “He has done much. Bernini’s works alone make the basilica shine.”

“And not just art,” Tommaso went on. “Discipline. Order. A firm hand. That’s what the Church needs. What it has always needed. Obedience, Dominic. Even when we don’t understand.”

Dominic turned slightly now, his eyes narrowing. “Obedience is holy when it serves truth. But the soul of a man must not be crushed under commands like a stone under marble. There is room in service for conscience.”

Tommaso barked a humorless laugh. “Conscience? The devil often speaks through such whisperings. That’s how heresy is born—one man’s ‘conscience’ against the wisdom of the Fathers.”

“I’m not speaking of rebellion,” Dominic said, firmer now. “But we are not beasts. We are not only hands to labor and lips to chant. The soul must ask. Must think. Christ Himself questioned those who taught falsely in the name of law.”

“And He also obeyed,” Tommaso snapped. “Unto death. He did not speak against the high priests when His hour came. You speak too often as if the Church needs correction. As if the structure God ordained might be faulty.”

Dominic straightened.

“No. But I believe even within the Church there are men who err. We are not yet in heaven. Should I close my eyes when I see injustice, simply because it wears crimson robes?”

Tommaso’s face darkened. “You speak in dangerous tones, brother.”

“And you speak like a hammer,” Dominic replied, “swinging hard with no sense of what you strike.”

“You doubt,” Tommaso said, glaring. “You question the hierarchy. That’s the root of all betrayal.”

“I serve the Church,” Dominic said, his voice now calm but edged. “I serve with hands and heart. But I will not serve with a chained mind. God gave us reason. He gave us discernment. If obedience were all He required, He would have made us cattle.”

Tommaso stood, pushing back from the table with a scrape of the bench.

“Be careful, Dominic. Your words slip too close to rebellion. I wonder if you would even recognize loyalty if it was written in gold above the altar.”

Dominic rose as well, though more slowly.

“And I wonder,” he said quietly, “if you would recognize truth if it whispered in a tongue your masters hadn’t taught you.”

They stared at each other for a long moment. Then Tommaso gathered his cloth, turned on his heel, and strode out of the refectory without another word.

Dominic sat down again, the tension still alive in the air. He pressed his palms flat to the table and breathed slowly, calling back calm.

In his mind, he whispered a verse.

"*Let the lying lips be put to silence; which speak grievous things proudly and contemptuously against the righteous.*"
—Psalm 31:18

He closed his eyes.

Lord, let me not speak falsely in fear, nor remain silent in cowardice. Keep my steps from pride, but my heart from chains.

Dominic remained seated on the worn bench of the refectory, the last spoon scraped clean, the clatter of dishes now only a distant sound. He leaned forward with his elbows on the table, hands folded, eyes downcast in thought. The words of Fra Tommaso still rang in his ears, as did the sharp echo of Lodovico Carafa's story from Acts—lies, judgment, obedience, death. Each seemed to circle like birds overhead, dipping lower into his chest with each breath.

His free time stretched before him like a quiet road, unmarked. He pushed himself up to leave, adjusting his robe as he turned toward the exit—only to find Captain Giorgio Malaspina already blocking the archway, arms folded, eyes sharp beneath his dark helmet.

"Ah, Brother Dominic," Giorgio said with a tight smile. "Just the man I was looking for."

Dominic halted, uneasy. "Captain Malaspina."

The guard stepped forward with the smell of leather and oil trailing him. He grabbed Dominic lightly by the collar, not roughly, but with the firm familiarity of a man who preferred pressure over persuasion.

"Walk with me. A word."

They stepped just beyond the arch into a narrow stone corridor where foot traffic was thin. Giorgio lowered his voice.

"I overheard something earlier. A confession. One of the nuns. Can't say who—it's a sacred thing, yes, yes. But the content…" He leaned in closer. "Disturbing."

Dominic kept his face still. "What sort of content?"

"Her brother," Giorgio whispered. "Under inquisitorial eyes. Used to serve in Naples. Something about texts, strange gatherings, quiet books."

Dominic blinked. "Books?"

Giorgio narrowed his eyes. “Listen. I’m not telling you to spy. Not exactly. But keep your eyes open. You live among these walls—pray, eat, sweep, light candles. You’re quiet. No one notices you. That’s useful.”

Dominic said nothing, but his stomach tightened.

The captain patted him on the shoulder, as though the matter were settled.

“I can't speak details. But sometimes a few ears can save the Church a thousand scars. You see the nun acting strangely, hear anything… bring word to me.”

Dominic looked down. “Of course.”

Giorgio smiled, satisfied, then turned on his heel and disappeared down the corridor with a clink of armor and a trail of polished boots.

Alone again, Dominic exhaled. He made his way toward the library, the words *every ear is needed in the service* still crawling through his thoughts like smoke through stone.

Inside the vast chamber, familiar and comforting in its stillness, he drifted through the rows of parchment and vellum, his hand trailing across the spines. Most monks went first for Scripture or saints’ lives. Dominic preferred the stranger shelves—the old records, the Roman histories, the scrolls kept less for faith and more for memory.

His eye fell upon a binding marked in fading gold: *Res Publica Antiqua: Commentarii de Iure et Imperio.*

He pulled the heavy book down and carried it to the wide oak reading table beneath the south window. The sun had begun to tilt low in the sky, and warm light poured over the yellowed pages.

He turned slowly to a passage detailing the Roman Republic before the emperors, before the Caesars.

“In the days of the Republic, power lay with the Senate and the People of Rome. No man ruled alone, and each held office only by consent of the governed. Yet ambition ever pressed against restraint, and even the oaths of liberty could not keep the knives sheathed forever.”

Dominic frowned as he turned the page, reading on about the fall of the Republic, the rise of Caesar, and the brutal betrayal upon the Ides of March.

“It was not foreign hands that struck Julius Caesar, but his own countrymen—men who once dined at his table, who praised him, who owed him loyalty.”

He leaned back, eyes fixed on the ceiling. *Why would they kill one of their own?* he wondered. *What drives a man to slit the throat of his friend?*

The answer whispered itself. *Power. Fear. Pride. Perhaps they thought they were saving Rome… or perhaps they wanted it for themselves.*

His fingers rested against the page, but his mind wandered far from the book. He saw again the narrow alleys of Trastevere, the smoky little chapel where his mother knelt to pray. His father's strong hands—stone-dust under his nails, leather belt wrapped tight to hold tools. The smell of soup cooking over fire. Laughter in tight quarters. Cold nights made warmer by bodies huddled close.

He remembered his mother's voice, tired but warm: *"God does not ask you to be loud, Dominic. Only faithful."*

He had not thought of that in years.

For a while, he sat quietly behind the book, unmoving, as memory held him in its soft, unshakable grasp. The silence of the library wrapped around him like a cloak.

Then he whispered, almost without knowing:

"*Teach me good judgment and knowledge: for I have believed thy commandments.*"
—Psalm 119:66

And then he turned another page.

Time passed unnoticed as Dominic sat with *Res Publica Antiqua* spread before him, eyes moving line by line, absorbing every phrase, every detail. His lips moved faintly as he read silently, his mind recording the words like ink upon vellum. He had always remembered things easily—faces, verses, entire sermons—and the flow of history clung to his memory like dew to leaves. The names of consuls, edicts of law, the slow rot of a republic drowning in its own pride—all of it settled into his thoughts with perfect clarity.

He was turning a page when the bench beside him creaked gently. Without needing to look, he knew who it was.

Brother Pietro della Rovere sat down with a calm presence, hands resting atop his folded robes, eyes half-shut in that manner of monks who had mastered observation without appearing to watch.

"You've been here long," Pietro said quietly. "Reading Roman history again."

Dominic nodded. "Yes, Brother. It's a habit I cannot seem to shake."

Pietro gave a small, amused hum. "There are worse habits."

He watched Dominic for a moment, then added, "Some say you can recite nearly the whole of Holy Scripture by heart. Is that true?"

Dominic hesitated, modestly. "Most of it. Some chapters elude me."

Pietro smiled faintly. "That is a rare gift, Brother Dominic. And one that ought not go to waste on candle stubs and sweeping stones. There is room in the Church for those who remember."

Dominic said nothing but glanced down at his book, as if embarrassed by praise.

Pietro leaned in slightly. “Have you ever thought of becoming a scribe? Or perhaps something more… fitting to your talents?”

“I’ve thought of it,” Dominic admitted. “Often. Reading is the work I love most.”

“Well,” Pietro said, chuckling under his breath, “Fra Giuliano Martelli is drowning in parchment and ink these days. He’s the Chief Archivist’s Assistant, but even he needs assistance now. There’s barely enough of him to keep up with the work.”

Dominic looked up, eyes brightening. “Truly? You would approve of that path?”

Pietro gave a slow nod. “I believe obedience comes in many forms. Perhaps your duty lies not only in your silence, but in your memory. Come, let us speak to Giuliano.”

Without another word, Pietro rose, and Dominic followed. The two monks walked through the quiet halls past side chapels and oil lamps, the faint sound of choirs echoing far off. They came to a small wooden door beneath an arched lintel carved with Latin verses. Pietro rapped once and opened it.

The chambers of Fra Giuliano Martelli were cloistered chaos—scrolls piled in woven baskets, stacks of parchment tied with colored ribbon, open codices laid out on desks beside candles burning low. Shelves groaned beneath the weight of leather-bound books, and the air smelled of beeswax, ink, and old parchment.

Fra Giuliano was already at his desk, his pale, narrow face bent over a sheet of vellum, his fingers stained with ink. He looked up with a start, blinking behind thin spectacles.

“Ah, Pietro. You’ve brought the boy.”

“I have,” Pietro said. “I leave him with you now. He’s eager, and he remembers more than most of us have ever known. I trust you’ll make use of that.”

Giuliano nodded and waved a hand, already distracted by the scroll beside him. Pietro gave Dominic a final look—a rare, approving one—and departed.

Giuliano stood and gestured to an empty chair beside one of the long desks.

“Sit, sit. No time to waste.”

Dominic obeyed quickly, settling before a clean page of parchment, a sharpened quill, and a small jar of ink.

Giuliano placed a worn manuscript beside him and tapped the faded letters.

“This—*Homiliae Antiquae*—collection of ancient sermons from the early bishops of Ravenna. Some of it crumbling. You’ll copy it, word for word, letter for letter. No flourishes. No flour dust. And silence, Brother Dominic. In the scriptorium, silence is sacred.”

Dominic dipped the quill in ink, poised it above the page.

Giuliano paused, looking at him with sudden seriousness.

“People forget,” he said slowly, “but if it weren’t for scribes like us, the world would sink into silence. Books rot, fires burn, kings forget. But when we copy—faithfully, precisely—we keep the soul of the Church from falling into the abyss. Without these words, Brother, the light of truth would gutter out like a candle in the wind.”

Dominic nodded slowly. “Then I will treat every letter as though it were a flame.”

Giuliano’s sharp eyes softened for just a breath.

“Good. Begin.”

And so, in the flickering quiet of the scriptorium, Dominic began to write. Ink flowed, letters formed. In every stroke was duty, and perhaps—finally—the first shape of a path forward.

The hours passed slowly in the scriptorium, marked not by bells, but by the rhythm of quills scratching parchment, the hiss of candlewicks curling in wax, and the quiet breath of men lost in their tasks. Dominic had worked without pause since midday, carefully copying from the faded *Homiliae Antiquae*, line after line, each letter shaped with reverence and precision. His hand remained steady, his back straight, though the dull ache in his shoulders told him it was time to rest.

He set down his quill gently, flexing his fingers, then leaned back for a moment and stretched. His eyes adjusted to the dimmer light—only a few candles still burned, their flames mirrored in the dark panes of the narrow windows.

Just then, the door creaked open. Fra Davide Spallanzani stepped in with his usual dramatic flair, humming a soft tune under his breath. His brown robes were dusted with colored pigment, and a small case of brushes and gilding knives hung at his hip like the tools of a traveling artist.

“Dominic,” he said warmly, offering a nod. “The night grows long, and still your pen dances. A good sign.”

“And you’ve come to paint by starlight?” Dominic asked with a tired smile.

“Always,” Davide grinned, settling into the desk across from him. “The dark makes colors speak more clearly.”

He unpacked his tools with graceful ease, pulling out a half-finished manuscript bound in blue calfskin—*Vitae Sanctae Catherinae*, the Life of Saint Catherine. Inside, the margins were already alive with delicate scrollwork and bursts of gold. He dipped a fine-tipped brush into a shell of lapis pigment and began painting the folds of a saint’s robe.

The two men worked in silence for hours. The candles burned low, were trimmed and replaced by quiet novices. Outside, the Vatican fell into shadow. But within the scriptorium, the hum of creation continued—letters and colors etched against time.

Eventually, Giuliano rose from his corner and approached Dominic's desk. He studied the page carefully, running a finger just above the inked surface.

"Excellent," he said at last. "Your hand is clear. Balanced. You have the discipline for this."

Dominic nodded quietly, humbled but pleased. "Thank you, Brother."

Giuliano gave him a short nod of approval, then snuffed out his lamp and left for the night, his silhouette vanishing into the dim hallway.

Dominic tidied his station, cleaned his quill, and tucked his parchment between two clean boards for pressing. As he stepped into the corridor, he could still hear the soft sound of Davide's brush behind him.

The walk to his chambers was quiet, the halls dim, the basilica asleep in marble and shadow. Dominic reached his cell, stripped off his robes, whispered a short prayer beneath his breath, and sank into sleep the moment his head touched the thin straw pillow.

The next morning, the bell sounded faintly beyond the walls, and Dominic awoke to the pale light of dawn. After washing his face and dressing, he made his way to the refectory where a small meal awaited: a piece of black bread, a ladle of porridge, and a clay cup of warm water. He ate quickly, exchanged a few quiet greetings, and returned to the scriptorium before the second bell had rung.

Inside, Davide was already seated, a tray of pigments arranged like a painter's altar. He motioned Dominic over with a grin.

"Come," he said, "I want you to see something."

Dominic stepped beside him and leaned over his shoulder. On the page lay a full miniature, recently completed: Saint Catherine of Alexandria, standing before the broken wheel of her martyrdom, surrounded by roses and angels with faces that seemed both joyful and sorrowful.

"You did this last night?" Dominic asked, astonished.

"Not all in one night," Davide chuckled. "But the final gold went down after you left. Look closely—see here? The wings of the angel? That's shell gold, pressed with my own breath to catch the candlelight just so. And the red? Ground cinnabar from Spain. And here—this blue robe—it's lapis from the east, crushed and mixed with egg white to give it body."

Dominic looked closer, studying the layers of color. "It seems alive."

"That's the goal," Davide said, more softly now. "To make the holy shimmer, to remind the reader that what they hold is not just ink and hide, but mystery wrapped in color. A painting in a manuscript must breathe, just like Scripture."

Dominic turned toward him. “Where did you learn all this?”

“Padua,” Davide replied. “Then Naples. I was taught by a Florentine who studied under the old masters of illumination. Some say the craft is dying, replaced by block printing. But I say it isn’t dying—it’s refining. Every good line is a rebellion against forgetting.”

Dominic smiled faintly. “You sound like Giuliano.”

Davide laughed. “Then I must be getting old. But it’s true. Without scribes and painters, we’d lose everything. History, faith, poetry… all swept away by time.”

He looked back down at the saint and dipped his brush again.

“Now go write,” he said, smiling. “Your letters are sharper than my lines.”

Dominic returned to his station, heart lifted. Today, the ink felt like more than work—it felt like preservation. Like beauty preserved in silence.

It was midday when Giuliano approached Dominic’s desk, interrupting the gentle scrape of quill on parchment. He held in his hand a crumpled sheet of paper, the ink blotched and the handwriting crude, as though written in haste or anger. He offered it to Dominic with a pinched expression.

“This arrived from the outer offices. Canon Lancellotti’s hand, though you’d never know it by the scrawl. He wants it copied, properly formatted, sealed, and delivered to Father Esteban before Vespers. Make sure the wording is preserved exactly, no mistakes. The message is… pointed.”

Dominic accepted the letter and laid it on his desk. The lines were jagged and ink-smudged, the Latin curt and blunt. He set to work decoding the handwriting first, then copying it onto fresh parchment in precise, elegant strokes.

As the words emerged beneath his hand, their meaning became clearer—dark, bitter, and burning with anxiety beneath the official tone.

To the Reverend Father Esteban de Villalobos, Jesuit of His Catholic Majesty’s Service,

I write to you not in the warmth of fraternal charity, but with the urgency of holy necessity.

It has come to my attention that certain manuscripts of deeply heretical origin—namely, those bearing the markings of Gnostic invention—have begun to circulate again in the libraries and private collections of Spain. That they were ever permitted to survive the purges of earlier generations is a scandal in itself, but that they now resurface under your watch as papal liaison is intolerable.

These texts—poisoned roots of serpentine knowledge—must be sought out and destroyed without delay. The so-called Gospel of Truth, Thunder: Perfect Mind, and the blasphemous fragments attributed to Valentinus and Basilides are not merely false—they are infected

vessels. The Inquisition must act swiftly, without hesitation. I urge you to remind your superiors in Madrid: tolerance in this matter is complicity.

Let it be understood: the Church has not forgotten how quickly heresy spreads when cloaked in mystery and dressed in sacred tone. The Gnostics whisper of hidden knowledge and divine sparks in mortal souls—but I tell you, such sparks are kindling for the fires of damnation.

Furthermore, I must address the question of our financial agreement.

The last disbursement from your side was incomplete. I was promised the full sum by the end of the month, and yet only a fraction has arrived. I remind you that the arrangements we have made—discreet though they must remain—require mutual trust. If funds are withheld again, I will have no choice but to seek correction through less private channels. You know as well as I that Rome has ears in every corner of this palace. Let us not force them to listen.

Do your part. Silence the heresies. And see that our agreement holds.

In Christ's service,
Canon Paolo Lancellotti
Theological Office of Papal Doctrine, Vatican

As Dominic penned the final flourish of Lancellotti's signature, he felt the weight of the words in his chest.

Gnostics… Valentinus… Thunder: Perfect Mind…

The phrases stirred a vague memory—strange fragments he had once glimpsed in a footnote, or perhaps in a whispered comment by one of the older brothers. They were always spoken of in warning. Or not spoken of at all.

But why such fear? he thought. *What truths could be so dangerous they must be erased entirely? And why would a man like Lancellotti, so rigid and cold, write of them with such fury… and threats?*

He looked around the scriptorium, the quiet desks, the distant figure of Davide hunched over a new illumination. There was no one here to ask. Giuliano had no taste for speculation, and certainly not for heresies. The others would only quote doctrine.

Then, like a thread pulled loose from memory, a name came to him.

Brother Raimondo Corsi.

He had spoken of Marcion. Of forgotten canons and voices left behind. Dominic recalled the strange weight behind his words, the sense of something withheld but waiting.

If anyone knew about these texts, Dominic thought, *it would be him.*

Still, he folded the finished letter and handed it to Giuliano, sealed and ready. Giuliano gave a gruff nod and slid it into the delivery pouch without comment.

“Good. Now, this scroll—copy it next. Temple tax records from Viterbo. Dull as stone, but needed by morning.”

Dominic sighed and took the scroll. He pushed thoughts of Gnostic gospels aside for now. But the words remained like dust beneath the skin of his thoughts—*divine spark… hidden knowledge… silence the heresies.*

He dipped his quill and began the next line. But even as the ink flowed, his mind drifted elsewhere—toward a quiet corridor, and a monk who perhaps knew too much.

The day stretched out before Dominic like a corridor with no end, the scent of ink and wax heavy in the air, his fingers already stained dark by midmorning. Giuliano entered the scriptorium carrying a stack of curled parchment tied in bundles of string, and he dropped them beside Dominic’s desk with a grunt.

“From the Apostolic Chamber,” he muttered. “Ledgers, inventories, and land grants. Nothing glorious, but Rome would collapse without it.”

Dominic nodded, resigned. He selected the first scroll and unrolled it across the desk, his eyes scanning the faded lines of blocky, utilitarian Latin.

Scroll One:
“Item: On the twenty-third day of August, the granary of San Silvestro reports the receipt of 12 barrels of wheat, 7 of which are designated for storage, 3 for sale, and 2 for clergy use. The cost of transporting said goods was noted as 14 florins, deducted from the diocesan treasury...”

He copied it carefully, line by line, quill scratching the parchment with a rhythm that soon blurred into the background of his thoughts.

Scroll Two:
“A record of land holdings assigned to the Abbey of Santa Lucia in Fermo. The eastern field, bordered by three oak trees and a stone wall, is to be used solely for the growing of lentils. Any diversion from this use shall incur a penalty of no less than one-third tithe of the field’s yield, payable to the Papal Court...”

Scroll Three:
“Inventory of candle wax requested for the Feast of St. Michael: 52 tall tapers, 28 altar candles, 14 handheld votives, and 6 pounds of loose wax for contingency. Supplier: Bartolomeo of Trastevere. Payment to be delivered in two parts: half in coin, half in store credit for future ceremonies...”

The monotony dulled his senses, but his hand did not falter. One scroll ended, another began.

Scroll Four:
“By order of the Office of Ecclesiastical Ceremonies, the new crimson vestments ordered for Cardinal Acciaioli are to be trimmed with gold thread, embroidered with the dove and the sword motif. Cost: 80 florins. Delivery expected by the Feast of St. Jerome...”

And on it went.

By the seventh hour, his shoulders had grown stiff. By the ninth, his lower back ached with a persistent throb. After the tenth hour, his fingers cramped with every stroke, and he was forced to stop every few lines to flex them open again.

Finally, with his head swimming and letters doubling on the page, Dominic set the last scroll aside and rose slowly. His knees cracked as he stood. He stretched his arms, arching his back with a hiss through his teeth, and walked the length of the scriptorium once—just to remember that he still had legs.

The scriptorium was nearly empty. Davide had left hours ago, and Giuliano now slept at his desk, cheek resting against a pile of loose parchment, his breath faintly wheezing.

Outside, the halls were still. The candles lining the corridors burned low. Dominic slipped quietly back to his chambers in the cloistered wing, his robes dragging behind him like the tail of a spent quill, he had skipped lunch.

Inside his small room, the darkness was still and thick. He lit no candle. With stiff hands, he pulled open the drawer beneath his cot and retrieved a small heel of dried bread—hard, cracked, but edible. He gnawed at it slowly in the dark, chewing with quiet weariness.

No wine, no porridge, no soup—just the dry taste of barley and silence.

He whispered no prayer tonight. His body was too heavy.

He lay down without undressing, wrapped in his robe, and curled his arms over his chest. The ache in his hands throbbed like distant drums, and sleep came upon him without fanfare—thick and blank as ink spilled across a page.

Morning crept into Dominic's chamber with a pale grey light and the faint toll of the third hour bell. His bones ached from the wooden cot, his joints stiff from a night spent without moving. He rubbed his eyes, sat up slowly, and felt his stomach gnaw from within—an echo of yesterday's hunger.

He wasted no time. Down the narrow corridor he walked, robes loose around him, sandals slapping faintly against the stone as he made his way to the refectory. The air smelled of old oats and smoke. He took a bowl and ladled thick, cold porridge into it, barely sitting before he began eating with greedy spoonfuls.

He devoured it like a wolf, his throat working to swallow mouthfuls of the tasteless mass, then reached for the earthen cup and poured water down to chase it. His stomach sighed, half-full at last.

Beside him, a familiar grunt sounded as Brother Salvatore Neri, Candle Warden of the basilica, took his usual seat. A large man with soot-stained fingers and ruddy cheeks, Salvatore grinned through his thick beard and held up a dark clay mug, already half-drunk.

“Morning’s better with a little bite,” he said, raising the ale. “Second cup’s sweeter than the first.”

Dominic blinked. “So early?”

Salvatore shrugged, sipping with pleasure. “I keep the lights of Peter burning through the night, I’ll be damned if I don’t light my own fire in the morning.”

Dominic gave a tired smile and nodded politely, but his thoughts were already elsewhere. He excused himself soon after, his mind fixated on something he could no longer suppress.

He stepped into the stillness of the library with quiet urgency, the wooden floor cool beneath his feet. The scent of parchment, leather, and ink filled the space like incense. In the corner, beneath the soft light of a narrow window, he saw Brother Raimondo Corsi hunched over a thick tome, his long fingers gently turning a page.

Dominic approached without a word and sat across from him. Raimondo looked up, eyes tired but kind.

“Early for study,” he said.

“I couldn’t wait,” Dominic said. “I’ve… I have a question.”

Raimondo nodded slowly. “Ask.”

Dominic leaned forward slightly, lowering his voice. “Tell me… the story of Marcion of Sinope. I want to know who he was. What he believed. And why the Church fears him so much.”

Raimondo’s expression did not change, but he glanced around to ensure they were alone. Then, lowering his voice to a near whisper, he began.

“Marcion was a shipowner’s son from Pontus. Came to Rome in the second century. He was rich, well-educated, and deeply troubled by the contradictions he saw in the Scriptures—especially between the Old Testament and the teachings of Christ.”

Dominic nodded, lips parted slightly.

“Marcion believed the God of the Hebrew Scriptures—wrathful, jealous, vengeful—could not be the same as the Father spoken of by Jesus, who preached love, grace, and forgiveness. He called the old god a demiurge—an inferior creator—and said that Christ came not to fulfill the Law, but to abolish it.”

Dominic frowned. “But… Christ said not one letter of the Law would pass away.”

Raimondo tilted his head. “Yes. And that is why Marcion was condemned. He rejected the entire Old Testament. Declared it void. Worse still, he made his own canon—only an edited version of Luke’s Gospel, and ten Pauline epistles. He removed anything that hinted at Jewish law or tradition.”

Dominic whispered, “He made the first canon?”

“Yes,” Raimondo said. “Before the Church ever declared its own. That is the part few speak of. The Church responded fiercely—he was excommunicated in 144 A.D. by the Roman clergy. His teachings were declared blasphemy, and his followers—Marcionites—were hunted in many provinces.”

Dominic’s mind swirled. “But his scriptures… they still exist?”

“Fragments,” Raimondo nodded. “Letters. Refutations written by his enemies. The Church destroyed what it could, but some copies survive in hidden places.”

Dominic stared at the table. “And do you think… was he wrong?”

Raimondo’s voice dropped to a hush. “He was a man of conviction, that much is clear. But conviction can be dangerous when it steps beyond obedience. The Church fears not only what is false—but what tempts.”

Dominic looked down, heart pounding. “I… I shouldn’t ask more.”

Raimondo placed a hand on the page before him and closed the book gently.

“Curiosity is not sin,” he said. “But you must be wise, Dominic. Truth is a deep well. And not all who look into it see the same reflection.”

Dominic nodded, grateful and afraid. His thoughts twisted between guilt and fascination, his stomach now full but his spirit hungry still—for answers, for something deeper than the ink he copied each day.

He stood slowly, murmured his thanks, and left Raimondo to his study.

But the whisper of Marcion lingered in his mind like the scent of ancient scrolls not yet opened.

The midday bells echoed faintly through the cloistered halls as Dominic stepped out into the open air. After hours of questions gnawing at his mind and words crowding his vision, the Vatican gardens felt like a balm. The fig trees swayed gently in the breeze, their leaves whispering secrets of old, while marbled fountains murmured with cool water. He walked slowly past the trimmed hedges and stone paths, hands folded behind his back, letting the scent of rosemary and damp earth calm the ache that had been rising behind his eyes.

For a brief time, he forgot Gnostics and scrolls and ledgers. He watched two sparrows bicker in the grass beneath an orange tree and allowed his thoughts to soften.

But duty called like a silent bell within him, and before long, he returned to the scriptorium.

The moment he sat at his desk, Giuliano appeared, his arms filled with fresh parchment and one crumpled sheet stained dark with what looked like wine and the faded edge of something greasy.

“This just arrived from the Rota,” Giuliano grunted, dropping it before Dominic. “From Father Lodovico Carafa. As always, lacking in grace, but full of judgment. You’ll need to rewrite this carefully. It’s going to noble hands.”

Dominic smoothed out the letter and squinted. The handwriting was severe and jagged, some words blotted or smeared by food stains. It smelled faintly of duck fat and vinegar.

He dipped his quill and began.

To the Noble House of Monterani,
and to Lord Enrico and Lady Faustina,

Let it be known that the matter of your grievance—your desire for dissolution of the holy union sealed in matrimony—has come before the Tribunal of the Rota, and it has been weighed not by emotion, but by the balance of Canon Law and the eternal statutes of Our Lord.

Your union was blessed before God and witnessed by His servants. To now seek separation on grounds of pride and convenience is not merely unlawful—it is a stain upon the sanctity of marriage itself.

I remind you both: “What God has joined together, let no man put asunder.” (Matthew 19:6)

Your complaints of incompatibility, bitterness, and loss of affection are the empty cries of souls spoiled by comfort. The Sacrament is not a garment to be removed when the season changes. It is a yoke, and it must be borne with humility.

Let there be no further appeal. You are hereby ordered to remain in conjugal union. To abandon it would be to abandon your duty to the Church and to Christ.

Should either party defy this decree, they shall be subject to spiritual sanction and loss of favor in ecclesiastical standing.

Repent. Reconcile. And remember that love is not the fire of youth, but the endurance of discipline.

In Judgment,
Father Lodovico Carafa
Auditor of the Sacred Roman Rota

As Dominic finished the letter, he reached for the next sheet—darker with wine, the corners curled, the ink blurred in places where droplets had soaked through. He held it close to the light and made out the sharp, uncompromising tone that was unmistakably Carafa’s once more.

He dipped his quill again.

To the Office of Urban Fiscal Management,
and to Lord Fabrizio della Treglia,

Be advised that the Tribunal of the Rota, in cooperation with the Apostolic Chamber, has completed its review of the accusations levied against your estate.

Evidence has been gathered and confirmed concerning falsified tax records, unlawful acquisition of state wine stores, and deliberate evasion of levies due to the Holy See. You, Lord Fabrizio, have abused your position, pillaged what was not yours, and dared to veil it behind a title granted by man.

Your crimes are not only civil—they are offenses against the order that God Himself has entrusted to His Church. I refer you to Proverbs 11:1 — "A false balance is abomination to the Lord: but a just weight is His delight."

By this authority, I decree the immediate confiscation of the vineyard estates at Tivoli, the casks within, and all related revenues. Your accounts shall be sealed pending further ecclesiastical review.

Do not look to Rome's nobility for protection—they will not shield you from divine justice.

The Church remembers. The earth may forgive. But your coin will not purchase salvation.

This judgment is final.

Father Lodovico Carafa
Auditor of the Sacred Roman Rota

Dominic leaned back and rubbed his eyes. His fingers ached, but the chill of the letters clung to him more deeply than any pain. Carafa's voice, even through parchment, was a cold wind —commanding, absolute, and cloaked in scripture.

Giuliano passed behind him, glanced at the finished pages, and grunted in approval.

"Well done. He'll want them delivered before sundown. Nobles love words when they're carved like blades."

Dominic nodded, but his thoughts wandered.

The warmth of the garden, the scent of rosemary, the calm of the sparrows—gone now, replaced again by iron ink and the voices of men who used God's name like a hammer.

He rolled his shoulders, adjusted his quill, and turned back to the next scroll. There would be more. Always more.

The Archive

The months fell away like dry leaves, each day nearly indistinguishable from the next. Dominic moved through his routine with quiet precision: rising before dawn, whispering his morning prayers with clasped hands, swallowing spoonfuls of porridge in the dining hall,

walking the familiar stone corridors toward the library, and then descending into the scriptorium where he labored through scrolls, letters, ledgers, and liturgies.

The rhythm became his world—silent, repetitive, slow, yet strangely soothing. He took breaks when needed, ate when permitted, and collapsed each night into his cot with his eyes still full of letters.

One morning, as he sat sharpening his quill at the long desk, Giuliano approached with his usual stack of work—but there was a rare glimmer in the old man's eyes.

"You're coming with me," he said plainly.

Dominic blinked. "To where?"

"You're no longer just a helper," Giuliano said, placing a hand on his shoulder. "You are now, officially, Chief Archivist's Assistant. You'll be entered in the registry this afternoon."

Dominic sat stunned. "Truly?"

"Truly," Giuliano said, gruff but not unkind. "Come now. We've work to do."

They left the scriptorium and walked through the winding corridors of the Vatican, passing through the cloisters and beneath arched ceilings that whispered with centuries of footsteps. At last they arrived at a guarded stone gateway flanked by two Swiss Guards in red and gold stripes.

"This is the Porta di Santa Anna," Giuliano explained. "Via di Porta Angelica leads here. Beyond this point is the entrance to the Archive."

The guards straightened as they approached.

"Morning, Giuliano," one said. "Business in the vault?"

Giuliano nodded. "This one's with me. His name is Brother Dominic Rossi. He is now Assistant Archivist. If he arrives here in my name, you'll let him pass."

The guards looked Dominic over, one of them jotting his name down in a worn ledger.

"We've got his face," the other said. "He may enter, if he wears the cross and has your approval."

Dominic gave a silent nod. His heart beat faster as they passed through the arch and descended a narrow stairwell carved into cool stone.

They emerged into the Archivum Secretum Vaticanum—The Vatican Secret Archive.

The air shifted immediately. It was cooler, older, heavy with the scent of aged parchment and the faint metallic tang of ink and dust. Massive shelves stretched in rows beyond sight, lined with scrolls bound in red leather, ancient codices locked in glass cases, stacks of sealed papal bulls and handwritten court records wrapped in linen ribbons.

Dominic stopped where he stood.

“This is…” he murmured, “incredible.”

Giuliano smiled faintly at his awe. “Sixteen centuries of records. Letters from emperors, kings, heretics, popes, inquisitors. Some of it has not been touched in decades. Some in centuries.”

Dominic took slow steps forward, eyes scanning the endless corridors of memory. “How is it all organized?”

“There are thirty-five miles of shelving,” Giuliano said, motioning toward the far walls. “It’s arranged by provenance, not subject. You won’t find ‘heresy’ or ‘mysticism’ as headings—but you will find the correspondences of Pius II, the registry of Avignon, the letters of Henry VIII begging for an annulment…”

He turned and gestured to a narrow stair. “We retrieve nothing without order. When a name is sent, a date, a location, we search the indices. Then we find the volume. Sometimes it takes hours, sometimes weeks.”

Dominic nodded, eyes wide.

Giuliano continued, “You’ll help me retrieve things. Manuscripts for scribal work. Books for review. Scrolls that must be preserved in duplicate. But not all of it is meant to be read. You understand?”

Dominic looked at him. “I do.”

“Good,” Giuliano said, clapping him gently on the arm. “Let’s begin.”

They walked deep into the rows, pulled several carefully listed manuscripts—one a letter from Pope Urban VI to a Spanish monastery, another a papal decree concerning lands in Naples—and then made their way back toward the scriptorium.

As they climbed the stairs and passed once more under the arch, Dominic turned to glance back.

Archivum Secretum Vaticanum.

The words echoed in his mind, resonating deeper than they ought. *Secretum.* Not simply private. Not just locked away.

Secretum.

Why hide anything so carefully, unless there were things that should not be seen?

Back at his desk, he opened the first manuscript. The familiar dance of quill and ink resumed, but his thoughts were elsewhere. His hand moved on its own, copying letters in silence while his mind wandered among miles of shelves, unopened bindings, unread thoughts, and forbidden truths.

The Secret Archive had opened its door to him.

And something in Dominic had opened too.

The passing weeks brought new rhythms to Dominic's life. The scriptorium was still his home, but now the secret archives were his charge, too. Giuliano had grown confident in his ability and began sending him alone to retrieve select manuscripts for copying—texts so delicate or old they could not leave the stone belly of the Archivum Secretum Vaticanum.

One morning, after the first meal, Giuliano handed Dominic a small slip of paper, folded and sealed with wax.

"You'll find these in Section XIV, shelf D, row 5," he said. "One is *Codex Sermonum Sancti Gregorii*, the other *Annales Ecclesiae Mediolanensis*. Copy only the underlined passages when you return. And mind the humidity near the lower rooms—it clings to the vellum."

"Yes, Brother," Dominic replied, slipping the list into his robe.

Giuliano paused before letting him go.

"And remember—only what's asked. The rest is not for you to study."

"I understand."

The guards at the Porta di Santa Anna nodded him through without a word now. He descended into the archive, his sandals clicking faintly on the smooth steps, echoing off the cold, stone walls. The silence swallowed him as he entered the great vault once more, this time alone.

The air was dry and quiet, dust hanging in golden shafts of morning light seeping through narrow windows. Dominic stood for a moment in the threshold, the rows of shelves yawning before him like the ribs of a sleeping beast. No one else stirred within. The guards did not follow him. He was, for the first time, completely alone in the Vatican's underbelly of secrets.

He walked slowly, tracing his fingers along spines bound in leather and linen. Titles embossed in Latin, Greek, Hebrew—some completely faded—rose and fell before his eyes: court decrees from long-dead bishops, personal letters from popes, records of excommunication and reconciliation, treaties between kings sealed with the ring of Peter.

Dominic searched for shelf D in Section XIV but quickly realized he'd wandered past it. The organization eluded him at first—the layout not intuitive, labeled by acquisition rather than chronology. He doubled back, puzzled, muttering softly to himself.

"This row ends at XIII… then XIV must turn here…"

He adjusted his direction and, after long wandering, began to piece together the logic of the place. Over time, his confusion yielded to pattern. At last, in a narrow passage lined with darkened vellum volumes, he found the right shelf.

As he ran his fingers over the bindings, he paused.

There, slightly ajar, sat a book not on Giuliano's list: ***Acta Pilati***, marked in faded gold leaf. The Acts of Pilate. Below it, in smaller text: *Evangelium Nicodemi*—The Gospel of Nicodemus.

Dominic glanced over his shoulder. Silence reigned. No footsteps, no voices.

He pulled the book from its resting place, its weight grounding in his arms. The cover creaked as he opened it.

The text was written in both Latin and a Greek hand he recognized but could barely read. He turned pages slowly, the ink sharp and dark even with age.

He read:

"And Pilate, fearing the murmur of the crowd, called forth Longinus, the centurion, and bade him speak of what he saw. And Longinus said, 'I pierced Him, and there came forth not only blood, but water. And the earth shook. And in the shaking, I felt no guilt but only awe, for His eyes, though closed, burned into mine still.'"

Another page:

"Then Nicodemus rose before the priests and said, 'Do not marvel that the veil was torn. The veil was the flesh of the Temple, and the Temple has spoken. You crucified the Word, but the Word is not silenced.'"

Dominic's breath caught.

He turned another page, reading a section that puzzled him:

"And in the night after the burial, Joseph of Arimathea came to the tomb and found it still sealed. And there stood a man clad in iron robes, with eyes like fire, who said, 'Why seek you the living among the tombs? The old gods have seen Him, and they are fallen.'"

He frowned. *The old gods?* The text danced between faith and strangeness, mingling the Roman world with gospel voice. It stirred something inside him—fascination laced with unease.

He closed the book quietly, replaced it on the shelf, and exhaled a long breath. His heart beat fast, not from guilt, but from the weight of what he had just touched.

He found the manuscripts Giuliano had requested shortly after—carefully wrapped scrolls marked with papal seals and a bound volume of Milanese church annals. Tucking them under his arm, he made his way back up the stairs, the silence following him like a shadow.

Back in the scriptorium, the familiar sound of scratching quills greeted him. Giuliano looked up from his desk as Dominic returned.

"Did you find the requested texts?"

“I did,” Dominic replied, placing them gently on the table.

“Good. Begin with the Gregorii excerpts. Then the annals—page 37 onward, as marked.”

“Yes, Brother.”

Dominic sat, drew his tools, and opened the first volume. But as he copied the worn words of Saint Gregory’s sermons, his mind kept returning—not to the task at hand, but to Longinus, to Nicodemus, and to that iron-robed figure guarding the tomb.

Why seek you the living among the tombs? The old gods have seen Him, and they are fallen…

The words etched themselves into his memory, whether he wanted them to or not.

Night bled into early morning before Dominic finally set down his quill, the last line of copied text glistening on the page. The silence in the scriptorium was thick, broken only by the crackle of dying candles. He stretched his fingers, his back stiff, and gathered the scrolls into neat piles. Giuliano had long since gone to sleep, but Dominic lingered in the quiet a moment longer before stepping into the hall and retreating to his chamber.

He slept deeply and without dreams.

With the first bell of the morning, Dominic rose. He knelt beside his cot and murmured softly:

“Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”
(Psalm 139:23–24)

Refreshed and calm, he made his way to the refectory. Today’s breakfast was lentil soup, thick with beans, and an apple with a cup of Posca—sour but warming. He ate in silence, surrounded by the quiet murmurs of other monks beginning their day, their wooden spoons clinking faintly against earthen bowls.

When the bowl was empty, he rose, thanked God under his breath, and made his way toward the library.

Inside, shafts of golden light sliced through tall windows, laying long patterns across the stone floor. Near one of the far tables, he saw Brother Raimondo Corsi hunched over a book, his slender fingers turning a worn page. Beside him sat another monk—older, with pale skin and a silvering beard—quiet and composed, with sharp, observant eyes. They were engaged in hushed discussion.

Dominic approached and greeted them. “Good morning, Brothers.”

Raimondo looked up and smiled gently. “Dominic. Come, sit. This is Brother Bartolomeo Danti.”

Bartolomeo inclined his head politely. “A pleasure.”

Dominic sat, lowering his voice. “I hoped to speak with you, Raimondo… I’ve recently come across the *Acts of Pilate*—the Gospel of Nicodemus. There were… parts I did not understand.”

Bartolomeo’s eyes flickered, and it was he who answered. “It is a curious text,” he said. “Not wholly apostolic, but not without weight. You may have noticed it mingles Roman motifs—imperial figures, court trials—with divine testimony.”

Dominic nodded hesitantly. “Yes… there was a part that spoke of gods falling. And an iron-robed man. That isn’t… scriptural.”

“No,” Bartolomeo said with a measured calm. “It is older. Symbolic. The fall of pagan Rome before the risen Christ. But the imagery... it lingers, because truth often hides behind metaphor. The Roman world was not erased in a night. It was... baptized.”

Dominic shifted, discomfort tightening in his chest.

“It felt wrong,” he admitted. “Strange. Almost dangerous.”

Raimondo leaned closer, lowering his voice. “Dangerous knowledge is still knowledge, Dominic. You are now trusted with entry to the Secret Archive. Perhaps the Lord intends for you to read what others fear.”

Dominic stared at him.

“The *Gospel of Thomas*,” Raimondo said softly. “The *Gospel of Mary*. They lie deeper in the vault. Forgotten by many, but not by all. I believe it would do you good to read them.”

Bartolomeo said nothing, but a faint, knowing smile curled on his lips.

Dominic was quiet, his mind turning like a wheel.

He looked down at the table, then lifted his eyes again. “I… will consider it.”

As he rose to leave, he nodded respectfully. “Thank you, Brothers.”

He walked out of the library, but the weight of their words clung to him like fog. His steps led him away from the books and toward the quiet of the Grotto. The stones beneath his feet seemed to echo his thoughts, each step heavy with questions.

He descended into the dim, sacred air, past the Clementine Chapel and toward the shadows where silence reigned. There he knelt before a stone column and closed his eyes.

In his heart, he prayed:

“Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from Thy presence; and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me.”
(Psalm 51:10–11)

The words steadied him, but the echo of Bartolomeo's smile and Raimondo's voice remained.

The Gospel of Thomas… The Gospel of Mary…

Even in prayer, the seed had been planted.

The low light of the Grottoes cast long shadows over the marble floor as Dominic moved slowly, fingers trailing the stone balustrades, lost in thought. The air smelled of candle wax, damp limestone, and the faint aroma of frankincense clinging to the chapels from the day's earlier prayers. He was not looking for anyone—he had come to clear his mind—but near the curved passage by the Chapel of Leo I, he saw her. Sister Caterina Farnese stood silently, hands folded in prayer, her eyes closed as though listening to something far away.

When she turned and saw him, her expression softened.

"Brother Dominic," she said, "wandering thoughts or searching soul?"

"Perhaps both," Dominic answered. "I come here to quiet one and tend to the other."

She smiled gently. "Then walk with me. I was heading to the Chapel of the Madonna of Partorienti. There is much there that the world forgets."

He nodded, following her through the still passageways, their footsteps light on the cold floor.

"This chapel," she began as they entered the vaulted chamber, "is the oldest among the grottoes still bearing the atmosphere of the Constantinian basilica. It was opened in 1616 under Pope Paul V, carved from beneath the basilica floor, and was the first here to be dedicated to the Virgin."

They stepped into the dim chamber. The scent was old stone and candle soot. The ancient fresco at the altar glowed faintly in the low light.

Caterina motioned to the painting. "This is by Antoniazzo Romano, or at least his workshop. It's a fragment, yet see how the angels still surround her—wings of faded crimson and gold. The Child stands upright in her arm, blessing. And see the veil in her right hand? She holds it not in fear but in reverence. She is both mother and queen."

Dominic stared at the image. The Virgin's eyes met his from centuries past, solemn and gentle, and something in her gaze stirred him.

"The Cosmatesque columns," Caterina said, pointing beneath the altar, "were taken from the funerary monument of Urban VI. On their golden capitals are eagles from the pope's family crest—wings spread in power."

She motioned to the ceiling frescoes.

“Giovan Ricci da Novara painted these between 1618 and 1619. See there? In the central vault, St Zoe is arrested as she prays at the tomb of Peter. It was 303, during Diocletian’s persecution. She was found kneeling, lips moving in prayer. They say she did not stop even as the guards pulled her away.”

Dominic followed her gaze to the scene. A woman, surrounded by Roman soldiers, clung to the edge of an idealized tomb, light radiating around her bowed head.

“And that,” Caterina said, pointing to the octagonal panel near the entrance, “is the Longobard and the Key of St Peter. The Longobard tried to pry the golden key from the sepulcher… and slit his own throat in madness, seized by a dark spirit. King Autari, seeing this, restored the key and made penance.”

Dominic felt a subtle chill run up his spine.

“The tale says an evil spirit took him?” he asked.

She nodded, her voice lower now. “So it’s recorded. Those who desecrate what is sacred often do not walk away unchanged.”

Dominic was quiet. Then, pointing toward a nearby bas-relief, he asked, “And there? St George and the Dragon. Why a beast like that in this place?”

“A symbol of the devil, of course,” Caterina replied. “But also of the darkness in man. St George’s victory is the triumph of faith over destruction. The dragon is a reminder… that evil often wears many forms, but faith must face it without fear.”

They walked further toward the back, and she read aloud the inscription on a plaque:

“Pope Innocent VIII from the Cybo family of Genova
commissioned his nephew, Cardinal Lorenzo of Santa Cecilia,
Archbishop of Benevento, to restore the oratory dedicated by Gregory III
to the Madonna Mother of God, and to place there
the Spearhead of the Lance which pierced the side of Our Savior,
sent by His Majesty of Byzantium, the Emperor of the Turks.
Anno Domini 1495.”

Dominic frowned.

“The very weapon that pierced our Lord… why is it revered?”

Caterina turned to him, her gaze unreadable.

“Because relics are not honored for what they were, but for what they touched. It was the moment of His sacrifice. That point of iron holds not death, but the mystery of redemption.”

Dominic’s eyes shifted to the crystal reliquary further in, where the lance point gleamed faintly behind glass. Still, something in him recoiled. The instrument of pain, preserved and revered?

He stepped closer to the altar, reading more of the inscriptions and following the monuments painted high on the vault and walls—the sepulchers, the altars, the records of forgotten popes.

So much hidden here.

So much buried.

And in the shadows of the past, saints, dragons, martyrs, and lances all shared the same space—each held by marble and faith, myth and memory.

Dominic remained silent.

But his mind, though reverent, was no longer still.

Caterina moved slowly through the chapel, her hands folded neatly in front of her. Dominic followed, listening to the soft rustle of her robes and the gentle cadence of her voice as she continued to guide him through the sacred space.

"To your left," she said, gesturing with a delicate turn of her wrist, "beneath the vault, are the remnants of the old basilica—the first span holds Giotto's *Navicella*, the mosaic once adorning the portico. See there? Peter sinking into the sea, his hand grasped by Christ. It was meant to greet all who entered with the reminder that even saints falter, but faith is never unanswered."

Dominic studied the mosaic, or rather what remained of it. Time had worn it to near-ghostliness, but he could still make out the turbulence of the water and the compassion in the Savior's face.

"In the next span," she continued, "was once the *Altar of the Blessed Sacrament*. And beyond it, the *Altar of St Leo IX*, called the altar *of the Dead*, because of the special indulgences granted there for the souls in Purgatory."

She turned and walked toward the central aisle, pausing beneath a tall fresco.

"And here, behind us, the *Altar of St Andrew*, commissioned by Pius II. A grand statue once stood there, now it rests in the sacristy. But the air remembers its weight."

They paused again before a set of inscriptions embedded in the wall.

"Two more burials were permitted here in 523," Caterina said, touching one with her fingertips, "by Pope Hormisdas and a figure known as Transmundo. These were rare honors… not given lightly."

Dominic leaned forward to read the adjacent names carved in fading Latin: *Dulcitius, Eutiche, Petrus…*

"The notaries and sub-deacons of the early ecclesiastical regions," she explained. "Men of order and letters. Buried where they served."

As they turned the corner near the entrance, Caterina pointed to another plaque, this one affixed beside a weathered cross.

“This cross comes from the old basilica,” she said, voice quieter now. “Some say it was kissed by pilgrims before the marble steps ever knew Michelangelo’s hands.”

Dominic walked slowly past it, and his eyes lifted to a large lunette painting near the right entrance.

“More monuments?” he asked.

She nodded. “Yes. These represent other sacred sites of the old church. That is the *Ciborium of the Holy Lance*, once built by Cardinal Lorenzo Cybo in 1495, beneath which rested the Spearhead—the same point kept now in crystal near the main altar.”

Dominic read again the inscription:

“The Spearhead of the Lance which pierced the side of Our Savior…”

His brow furrowed. “But if this is the weapon that caused His death… why is it treated as holy?”

Caterina turned to him, her expression solemn. “The wound it made was not the final harm, Dominic—it was the opening. The water and blood that flowed from it was the birth of His Church. What breaks the body can still sanctify the soul.”

“But it was an act of violence,” he whispered. “And now it’s encased in crystal, a treasure…”

Caterina’s gaze was distant, almost lost in memory. “Violence and sanctity have long shared uneasy company. That tension is the mystery of the Church… and of man himself.”

They walked further into the chapel’s deeper section. High above, another fresco adorned the vault, depicting *The Sainted Popes of the Name of Leo*, surrounded by angels in medallions.

“To the right,” she pointed, “fragments of three prayers by Pope Gregory II—meant to be read during Mass for the soul of the pope. Words etched in stone, so they would never be forgotten.”

Dominic traced one of the inscriptions lightly with his hand. The Latin was faded but legible, and he silently read a line from it, the words resting heavy in his chest:

“Fiat voluntas tua in sanctis tuis sicut in coelis et in terra…”

At last, they came to a quieter alcove on the left wall. Two paintings of the old basilica remained.

“Here is the *Ancient Choir of Sixtus IV*,” Caterina said, “dedicated to the Immaculate Madonna and the saints Francis and Anthony of Padova. You can see, faintly, within the altar —Michelangelo’s *Pietà*. And beside it, the *Facade of the Old St. Peter’s*, before the demolition of 1606.”

Dominic looked at the façade, captured in quiet dignity, nothing like the towering spectacle it had become.

“I sometimes wonder,” he murmured, “how much beauty we’ve buried to build new walls.”

Caterina turned toward him then, her gaze sharp and unwavering.

“We bury many things, Brother Dominic. Monuments. Saints. Secrets.”

Dominic said nothing. Her words echoed inside him, deeper than he could name.

They stood for a while in stillness, only the flicker of candlelight dancing across marble and memory.

Finally, Dominic spoke.

“I never expected to find so many questions beneath the tombs.”

“You will find more,” she said, “if you’re willing to see.”

With that, she bowed her head gently and departed the chapel, her footsteps fading into the hush of the Grottoes.

Dominic remained behind, his eyes lifting once more to the saints, the angels, and the spear behind glass.

Even here—surrounded by relics and paintings, by prayers etched in stone and secrets bound in silence—he felt the tremble of something awakening inside him.

A whisper between faith and history.

The candles flickered softly in the airless hush of the Grotto. Dominic remained near the Chapel of the Madonna of Partorienti, seated on the stone step near the fresco of Saint Zoe, his thoughts drifting, stirred by the weight of relics and whispered histories. A few paces away, Sister Caterina knelt before the altar, her veil dimly lit by the fading oil lamp that hung above the Virgin and Child.

She stayed unmoving for a long time, her head bowed low, lips murmuring a silent litany. There was a stillness about her—sacred, but heavy—as though she bore a burden she dared not name aloud.

When she finally rose and turned away from the altar, Dominic stood and stepped toward her.

“Sister Caterina,” he said gently. “May I… ask you something?”

She looked at him cautiously. “If it is not about relics or inscriptions, Brother, then tread carefully.”

He hesitated. “It’s not about stones or marble this time. I wanted to ask… about your visions. I’ve heard whispers among the monks. That you see things… that others cannot.”

She stiffened, her eyes narrowing, but there was no anger—only caution. “You should not ask about such things, Dominic. The air here listens. So do other ears.”

“I only ask to understand. I mean no harm.”

She looked down, pulling her arms around herself. “Most would call me mad. Or worse… possessed. If the wrong word reached the wrong ear, the Holy Office would not hesitate.”

Dominic’s voice dropped. “You speak of the Inquisition?”

She nodded slowly. “I have seen saints… glowing with light, standing near tombs, watching the world with pity. But also devils. Things of shadow, with eyes like burning iron. Sometimes they call me by name in my sleep. Sometimes they whisper things I cannot repeat. You must promise me—on your soul—that you will never speak of this to anyone.”

“I swear it before God,” Dominic said solemnly.

Her composure broke then. She turned away, pressing her hand to her face, but a stifled sob escaped her lips.

“I don’t know what is happening to me,” she said through trembling breath. “There are days when my thoughts are not my own—filled with lust, or violence, or rage. It’s as though something is inside me, testing me… seducing me. I fear I will be lost.”

Dominic stepped closer, his voice calm, steady. “You are not lost, Sister. The Lord does not abandon those He has chosen to speak through. What if these visions are not a curse—but a call?”

Her tear-filled eyes turned toward him, confused. “A call?”

“Perhaps you are meant to see what others cannot. Perhaps these apparitions—saintly and demonic—are warnings, or revelations. And perhaps… you were chosen.”

Caterina’s lips trembled, and she looked away again. “Then why do I feel so filthy when I wake from them?”

Dominic knelt beside her, and with quiet conviction, recited aloud:

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”
(John 1:5)

The words lingered, and Caterina closed her eyes.

They sat together in silence, letting the stillness hold them before she spoke again, her voice softer.

“There is word from Spain,” she murmured. “A town near Toledo… where women were burned. Not witches by trade, only those accused of dreaming too vividly. One girl claimed to see angels in the hills. Another, a boy, said he saw Mary appear in the reflection of a puddle.

Both vanished before their trials. The Inquisition condemned their families instead. Heresy by inheritance."

Dominic frowned. "And still the Church claims to be the shepherd of souls."

"There is also rumor," she added, "that in Portugal, a nobleman's library was burned because it contained condemned writings. The owner imprisoned, his wife made to confess that demons whispered the texts into her husband's ears at night."

"They fear knowledge," Dominic said.

"They fear what they cannot explain," she replied. "And in that fear… they destroy."

Dominic sat back against the pillar behind them, letting the cold stone soak through his robe.

"If demons test you," he said quietly, "then know they would not waste their time unless they feared what you might become. Even Christ was tempted."

Caterina looked at him, a fragile smile brushing her lips. "You speak like someone who also carries secrets."

Dominic gave no answer.

He only stared ahead at the painted Virgin, veil held in reverence before the blessing hand of the Christ child, and let the silence speak what neither dared to say.

The stone echoed gently beneath Dominic's sandals as he stepped into the dim, echoing grandeur of the Basilica. Rays of morning light pierced through the stained-glass windows, casting colors across the marble pillars. There, in the vast emptiness of the central nave, sat Brother Alessandro Greco at the organ, his fingers moving gracefully over the polished keys like a man caressing heaven into song.

A low hum rolled through the chamber as the pipes awoke, and then the tones swelled into a sacred melody. Alessandro's voice soon followed—pure, piercing, unwavering.

Christus vincit, Christus regnat, Christus imperat!
Christus vincit, Christus regnat, Christus imperat!

Exaudi, Christe

Exaudi, Christe

Ecclesiae sanctae Dei salus perpetua

Redemptor mundi, tu illam adiuva

Sancta Maria, tu illam adiuva

Sancta Mater Ecclesiae, tu illam adiuva

Regina Apostolorum, tu illam adiuva

Sancti Michael, Gabriel et Raphael vos illam adiuvate

Sancte Ioannes Baptista, tu illam adiuva

Sancte Ioseph, tu illam adiuva

The words reverberated from the dome above, filling every corner of the Basilica. Dominic stood at the side, half-shadowed behind a pillar, his lips moving in silent harmony, his breath shaping the ancient chant as his thoughts lifted in quiet prayer.

O Lord who knows the hearts of men, lead me not by certainty, but by humility. Let truth find me in silence and patience. If shadows whisper, let my soul hold fast to light, and may I never mistake Your silence for absence.

He remained there for a while, eyes closed, the music washing over him like rain on dust. Then the final chord rolled like thunder through the dome and faded into silence. Alessandro remained at the keys, his fingers still, his gaze far away, as though listening to something only he could hear.

With a bowed head and quiet breath, Dominic turned and left, passing through the heavy doors into the golden light of the Vatican Gardens.

The air was warmer there. The leaves above rustled lightly in the breeze, and the garden beds spilled color in every direction. For a time, Dominic simply walked—past the sculpted hedges, the still fountains, the old olive trees stretching toward heaven with gnarled grace.

Then, from the side path beneath the shade of the cypress, Fra Niccolò Spina passed by. He was draped in his gray robes, eyes downcast, silent as always. But as he moved past Dominic, he pressed something discreetly into his hand—a folded slip of paper—and then vanished down the path without a word.

Startled, Dominic stopped beneath the cypress and opened the small note.

The words were written in careful, narrow script:

"*Lux interna triumphat carne—Gnosis, non timor, salvat*."

Dominic read it twice.

"The inner light triumphs over the flesh—Gnosis, not fear, saves."

He stared at it, the meaning burning gently in his mind like a flame behind gauze. The note trembled slightly in his fingers. Why would Spina give him this? And what did it mean? A warning? A call? Or a test?

He folded the paper and tucked it deep into his sleeve, glancing around the garden. Monks and nuns moved along the winding paths, some reading in the sun, others walking in pairs or seated quietly under the shade of fig trees. A few staff members passed by with baskets of herbs or flower clippings. Everyone was wrapped in their own small silence.

And yet, something unseen pressed at the edge of the day.

By noon, Dominic made his way to the dining hall. Today, the smell was different—a warmth in the air that hinted at something more than bread or porridge. When he sat, a plate was brought to him: a portion of baked fish with a drizzle of olive oil and lemon, a side of stewed greens and carrots. A rare and quiet joy flickered within him. He folded his hands and whispered a blessing.

Blessed are You, Lord of nourishment, who gives the earth to feed the body and wisdom to feed the soul. Let neither abundance make me proud nor hunger make me bitter. May I learn contentment with what is given.

The room remained mostly quiet as they ate. No idle talk today, only the sound of spoons against wooden bowls and the occasional clink of clay cups being refilled.

After his meal, Dominic returned to the scriptorium. The hours passed with the slow rhythm of ink and parchment. His fingers moved with practiced grace, shaping letters that would last longer than his own name. The soft scratching of quills, the dim flicker of daylight through high windows, the scent of vellum and wax filled the hours with a kind of monastic stillness.

Then came the familiar sound of Giuliano's footsteps behind him.

"Dominic," the old archivist said, handing him a worn parchment with a list. "The next scrolls are in the Secret Archive. Go and bring these. Careful with the Roman documents—they crumble at the touch."

Dominic nodded, placing his quill into the inkwell and stretching his aching fingers. He folded the list into his satchel and left the scriptorium. As he walked down the hall toward the deep vaults of the Archivum Secretum, the note from Fra Niccolò brushed against his arm like a second pulse beneath the fabric.

And though he did not yet understand it, its words burned with strange certainty. Something hidden was beginning to move.

The torches along the vaulted walls burned low, casting trembling shadows through the vast belly of the Archivum Secretum. Dominic moved carefully between the stone shelves, his fingers tracing over old catalog labels, the list from Giuliano clutched in one hand, his lantern in the other. The hush of the archive was thick, almost alive—breathing in dust and memory.

He had already gathered several of the scrolls Giuliano had listed—*De Origine Senatus Romani* among them, a lengthy account of the Senate's ancient rituals—but one elusive text remained. He moved deeper into the rear chamber, down where the cold bit stronger and the floor curved slightly as if following the bowels of an old ship.

In a narrow crevice of shelving, he reached for a misplaced vellum folder that looked older than the others, its seal half torn. The ink on the spine had faded. Curious, he opened it.

Archivum Inquisitionis
File 1579 / Suppressed

His heart slowed. The parchment crackled slightly as he unfolded it. The heading was inked in bold red, a mark of condemnation.

Accused: Maria di Castello, widow, aged 28.
Charge: Heresy and witchcraft.
Notes: "Brought before the tribunal for refusing to confess, she was subjected to the strappado twice. No evidence of sorcery was discovered, no witnesses credible. Still, she was condemned to perpetual silence and death by water. Her body was never returned to her kin. Recommendation: file closed, matter not to be spoken of again."

Below it, in hurried script, almost hidden: She wept for her children. Innocent.

Dominic's hand trembled. The lantern flame flickered violently, throwing her name across the floor in long shadow. *Perpetual silence and death by water.* His mouth went dry. He swallowed hard and forced his breath to calm.

He tucked the folder back and turned sharply—he had to keep moving. Giuliano's list.

Next aisle. More scrolls, mostly dry legal inventories and fiscal annals. His eyes glazed over the *Inventory of Candelabra, 1618*, the *Exchequer Notes from Corsican Benefices*, dull and endless.

He moved on.

Midway through another aisle, a scroll caught his attention—its tag crumpled and scorched slightly at the edges. He pulled it down.

Incident Report, 1511
Case: Brother Anselmo, library assistant, crushed by a falling shelf of codices.
Notes: "It is whispered he had been reading forbidden texts of Hermes Trismegistus. The shelf fell though no tremor shook the hall. Official record: accident. Private note: silence the rumor."

Hermes Trismegistus. The name surfaced like a dark fin beneath water. Dominic closed his eyes for a moment, repeating it under his breath. *Hermes… Trismegistus. Who are you?*

He carefully returned the scroll and took a few more paces.

Then another.

Incident Report, 1603
Case: Two choirboys found drowned in the basilica's cistern.
Notes: "No explanation. Marked as mischief. But keys to the cistern were kept in the sacristy, under lock."

His chest grew tight. *Two boys. Drowned? How did they get in?*
He pictured the cistern—deep, dark, iron-bound. A lock. A key. Who had it?

Another shelf. Another scroll, this time bearing a wax seal cracked long ago.

Secret Treasury Report, 1622
Subject: Barberini Accounts
Extract: "From Spanish gold received, only one-fifth entered the official Camera Apostolica. The rest diverted through the bank of the Altieri family. Funds spent on private palaces, on statues, and on bribes to cardinals. Official books show deficit. Real balance hidden."

In the margin:

"Should this be revealed, the house of Barberini falls."

Dominic's blood ran cold. His breath came shallow. *Bribes to cardinals? Sacred money for palaces?* These were not rumors in a tavern—they were etched in Vatican ink, archived and locked in silence.

He stood still, the lantern low now, casting his face in the dull glow of shock. One hand rested against the stone shelf, the other gripping the folded scroll list for Giuliano—half-forgotten.

His thoughts swirled like ash in a whirlwind.

Maria di Castello… a mother drowned without trial.
Two boys dead—keys locked away.
Barberini gold scattered like rot beneath marble.
And Hermes. Hermes Trismegistus..
Who read his texts? Why did Anselmo die? Why silence?

Dominic felt an ache grow inside his chest—not fear, but something colder. A betrayal deeper than he could name. He wanted to scream but could not. The archive swallowed sound.

He closed his eyes and stood there, unmoving, for many long moments.

Only then, as the pain in his hand from gripping the scroll list grew unbearable, did he remember why he had come. Slowly, numbly, he turned and resumed his search—*De Legibus Antiquis Romae*—Giuliano's scroll. Just work. Just paper.

But inside, the silence had cracked. Something within him had shifted. And Dominic knew, even as he gathered the last scrolls and began the walk back to the scriptorium, that what he had seen today could not be unseen.

Dominic's boots echoed down the corridor as he turned sharply back into the shadows of the archive, heart pulsing like a drum in his ears. The scrolls for Giuliano rested in his satchel, but something else now pulled at his spine—a name, half-whispered by Raimondo and

Bartolomeo weeks ago. *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*. The text they'd said bore whispers of hidden teachings. And if what he had seen today in the forbidden files meant anything—he had to know.

He made his way deeper into the heart of the Archive, into the far-reaching corners where the tags became fewer and dust grew thick. He moved his lantern across the faded spine of old vellum-bound manuscripts, muttering fragments of Latin titles under his breath.

After a tense search, his fingers found it: a thin, brittle volume nestled between volumes marked *Apocrypha Orientalis* and *Acta Synodi Constantinopolitanae*. The title, handwritten on a narrow strip of parchment glued to the spine, read simply:

"Evangelium Mariae – Suppressum"

Dominic took it with trembling hands and carried it reverently to one of the reading tables set near the wall. No one was nearby. He lowered himself slowly onto the bench, the old leather-bound cover rough beneath his palms.

He opened it.

Pages 1 to 6 were gone. Torn, burned, or perhaps deliberately cut out. The manuscript began abruptly on page 7.

Beware that no one lead you astray saying 'Lo here' or 'Lo there!' For the Son of Man is within you.

Dominic read it twice.

Within you? he thought. *The Son of Man?* But the Gospels spoke of the Son of Man returning in glory, descending from heaven like lightning. How could He be within?

He kept reading.

Follow after Him!..Those who seek Him will find Him. Go then and preach the gospel of the Kingdom.

Then:

Peter said to Mary, Sister we know that the Savior loved you more than the rest of woman. Blessed are you that you did not waver at the sight of Me. For where the mind is there is the treasure.

Dominic's brow furrowed.

Where the mind is, there is the treasure… It echoed like a riddle from the Proverbs, and yet it was…different. More inward, more mystical. He turned the page.

I said to Him, Lord, how does he who sees the vision see it, through the soul or through the spirit?

The Savior answered and said, He does not see through the soul nor through the spirit, but the mind that is between the two—that is what sees the vision…

Dominic sat still, mouth slightly open. He whispered, "*The mind… between the two?*" A concept foreign to him. The Scriptures he had studied always spoke of soul and spirit, of body and sin, but this… this spoke of the mind as the seat of divine vision, as if man had a place within to *see* the sacred directly.

He flipped forward.

When the soul had overcome the third power, it went upwards and saw the fourth power, which took seven forms.

He read on:

The first form is darkness, the second desire, the third ignorance, the fourth is the excitement of death, the fifth is the kingdom of the flesh, the sixth is the foolish wisdom of flesh, the seventh is the wrathful wisdom.

Dominic's hand went to his mouth.

The fifth is the kingdom of the flesh… I am flesh…

But I am soul also, he thought. *Flesh is of dust. But foolish wisdom… wrathful wisdom?* He did not understand. And yet, he feared that part of him did.

He continued.

Peter answered and spoke concerning these same things. He questioned them about the Savior: Did He really speak privately with a woman and not openly to us? Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did He prefer her to us?

Then Mary wept and said to Peter, My brother Peter, what do you think? Do you think that I have thought this up myself in my heart, or that I am lying about the Savior?

Levi answered and said to Peter, Peter you have always been hot tempered. Now I see you contending against the woman like the adversaries. But if the Savior made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her? Surely the Savior knows her very well.

Dominic stared at the passage. The text felt warm and sharp at the same time.

The Savior made her worthy…

He loved her more than the others…

Dominic closed his eyes. He had always pictured the disciples as a unified body—guided by Christ, filled with the Spirit, obedient to the Gospel. But this… this spoke of tension, of jealousy, even of resistance among them.

He remembered John's Gospel: *“Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord…”*

But here, Mary wasn’t just a messenger. She was teacher. Confidante. The bearer of hidden words.

He exhaled and leaned back, the weight of what he had read settling in his chest like an ember.

This was not a doctrine he had ever been taught. Not even in whispers. This was a different current, running deep beneath the stone foundation of the Church. Hidden. Suppressed. Dangerous.

He gently closed the manuscript and ran his hand over its leather cover.

What does it mean that the Son of Man is within us? he thought. *Is it the soul? Or is it the divine spark?*

If Mary was truly loved more than the others—why have they buried her voice?

Dominic rose from the bench slowly, his legs stiff from sitting too long, and returned the Gospel to its place on the shadowed shelf. His fingers lingered a moment before releasing the cover.

Dominic's breath still came shallow as he stepped back from the shadowed shelf, the echoes of the *Gospel of Mary* pressing heavily against his chest. But he could not leave—not yet. Another name had risen in his memory, whispered once like a seed planted by Raimondo and Bartolomeo weeks ago. *The Gospel of Thomas.* The name had sounded strange then, foreign. But now… now it beckoned like a key to some deeper chamber of understanding.

He moved toward the shelves again, following no clear system now—only instinct. His lantern’s dim glow flickered across the bindings, over titles both sacred and condemned. And then, in a corner less tended, coated with a film of dust and time, he found it. A small, humble manuscript without decoration, with a binding like cracked skin.

He pulled it down slowly, brushing it off, and stood where he was, between the shelves, alone. His fingers trembled as he opened the cover and saw the first lines:

These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymos Judas Thomas wrote down.

Dominic swallowed.

And he said, "Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death."

He blinked, staring at the sentence. He whispered it again under his breath. *Not experience death…*

He turned the page.

"Let him who seeks continue seeking until he finds. When he finds, he will become troubled. When he becomes troubled, he will be astonished, and he will rule over the All."

His hand moved to his chest. He felt troubled already. He had found something—but he did not understand it. And yet… he kept reading.

"If those who lead you say to you, 'See, the kingdom is in the sky,' then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will precede you. Rather, the kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you."

Dominic's mouth parted slightly. The kingdom… inside me?

"When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living Father. But if you will not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty, and it is you who are that poverty."

He gasped slightly. It was like a chisel striking at the heart of his teachings. *Know yourself*—had he ever? Was the kingdom not in the hands of popes and princes and altars of marble and gold?

He flipped ahead.

"I have cast fire upon the world, and see, I am guarding it until it blazes."

"This heaven will pass away, and the one above it will pass away. The dead are not alive, and the living will not die."

"The living will not die?" he whispered aloud.

He thought of the soul. Perhaps this meant that the spirit could not perish. But if so… why had the Church buried this text?

"On the day when you were one you became two. But when you become two, what will you do?"

He did not know. The question pierced him.

He turned more pages, devouring every line.

"Men think, perhaps, that it is peace which I have come to cast upon the world. They do not know that it is dissension which I have come to cast upon the earth: fire, sword, and war."

Dominic frowned. This was not the Jesus of Sunday Mass. *Was He not the Prince of Peace?*

"If the flesh came into being because of spirit, it is a wonder. But if spirit came into being because of the body, it is a wonder of wonders."

"Indeed, I am amazed at how this great wealth has made its home in this poverty."

He clenched the book tighter.

"Blessed are the solitary and elect, for you will find the kingdom. For you are from it, and to it you will return."

"It is I who am the light which is above them all. It is I who am the all. From me did the all come forth, and unto me did the all extend. Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there."

Dominic stared at that sentence, stunned.

Lift up the stone… split wood… and I am there.

Not just in church. Not just in consecrated bread or holy places. *Everywhere.*

"It will not come by waiting for it. It will not be a matter of saying 'here it is' or 'there it is.' Rather, the kingdom of the father is spread out upon the earth, and men do not see it."

Dominic closed the book with shaking hands. He leaned against the bookshelf for a moment, the leather warm from his palms, his forehead lightly damp. The words blazed in his mind, uncontainable.

This was not just difference. This was *revolution*—a Gospel that redefined the soul's relation to God, to the world, to the Church. *Know yourself… the Kingdom is inside you.*

He took a step back, eyes wide. How had this survived? Why had it been hidden? Did the priests know? Did the pope?

He placed the book back, gently, as if it would shatter if touched too roughly. And then he turned and strode away from the shelf, from the aisle, from the Archive itself—heart thundering, thoughts rising like a storm tide.

He did not know what path he walked now.

Only that there was no going back.

Dominic rushed through the dusky corridors of the Vatican, breathless and alert, every sound around him echoing more sharply than usual, as if the very walls were whispering to him. His sandals scuffed over the ancient stones, but he barely felt them. In his mind swirled not the sound of his footsteps, nor the scent of old manuscripts and burning candlewax, but the living words he had just read: *"The kingdom is within you… Split a piece of wood and I am there."*

He reached the scriptorium and slipped inside like a shadow. The room was quiet save for the scratching of quills. A few scribes glanced up briefly, nodding in recognition, but Dominic said nothing. He slid into his wooden seat, the edges worn smooth by his daily labors, and unrolled the parchment that Giuliano had sent him to fetch. He dipped his quill, ink dark as blood, and began the familiar routine of copying.

"In the year of our Lord 1394, it was decreed that the holdings of the diocese of Tivoli be placed under the shared stewardship of the clerics of San Giovanni and San Clemente, with

stipulations regarding the granaries and water rights to be renewed every seventh year, unless impeded by civil unrest or papal interregnum…"

Dominic wrote, but he did not read. The words passed through his hand like dead leaves. His mind was elsewhere—among stones split and visions seen not with soul nor spirit, but with the *mind between the two.*

He paused, the feather tip of his quill suspended in the air. *If the kingdom is within me, what kingdom? What throne might sit hidden behind the veil of flesh and blood?* He glanced to the side, catching the flicker of candlelight in a brass cup, and saw there not just flame, but a kind of reflection, a spark of something deeper.

"The dead are not alive… and the living will not die."

He pressed his pen again to the parchment.

"…the funds from the treasury were to be apportioned equally among the parishes of the southern district, save those under papal privilege, for whom special taxation rules applied as recorded in the canon annals of the Lateran synod of 1308…"

The dull rhythm of law and tithe carried on. He bent his neck and scribbled into the evening, his body present, his thoughts burning like coals under the ash. He could not speak these ideas—not now. He had seen the fates of those who asked the wrong questions. The fate of Maria di Castello still haunted him. But Bartolomeo and Raimondo knew… how? He needed to speak to them again, cautiously.

The bell tolled low over the Vatican, calling the workers and monks to the evening meal. Dominic put away the scrolls and rose, his back stiff, fingers sore. He moved down the hallway to the dining hall, where the scent of goat milk and baked barley hung in the air. Tonight was a modest feast compared to most evenings. A clay bowl held sliced figs, another, soft barley cookies. There was a cup of light wine, sweet and thin, and a portion of goat milk, still faintly warm.

Dominic sat in silence with the others. He sipped and chewed, grateful yet distant. The food nourished his body, but not his restlessness. He glanced across the table to where Brother Tommaso spoke animatedly with another novice, but Dominic heard none of it. He heard only the soft echo—*He who finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death.*

After the meal, he stood slowly and made his way to his small chamber. The lamp there burned low, and the humble cross on the wall cast a long shadow. He knelt before his cot, elbows on the thin blanket, and closed his eyes.

"Lord Jesus," he whispered, "if what I have read is not of You, cast it from me. But if it is Your hidden voice, hidden even from the rulers of Your Church, then help me find the truth. Let me not fall into pride or error. Let me not be deceived. But let me not turn away from the light if You are its source."

He opened the small copy of the Scriptures he kept tucked by his bed. The Gospel of John opened before him, and his eyes landed on a familiar passage:

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." — John 8:32

Dominic stared at the verse for a long time. Then, slowly, he closed the book, blew out the lamp, and lay upon his cot. His hands still tingled, and his mind still burned.

Sleep came like a veil pulled slowly over a flame. But deep within him, something still glowed.

The morning sun was low in the sky, slanting through the columns and hedges of the Vatican gardens like golden fingers. Dew still clung to the grass, and the scent of wet earth and rosemary filled the air. Dominic walked slowly, his hands folded in the sleeves of his robe, his eyes weighed with thoughts that had not let him sleep much in the night.

At a distance, beneath a cypress tree, he saw Brother Bartolomeo Danti seated on a worn stone bench, eyes closed, his face serene as if in deep meditation. Dominic hesitated at first—perhaps he should not disturb him—but then he cleared his throat softly.

“Peace be with you, Brother Bartolomeo.”

Bartolomeo’s eyes opened slowly, calm and clear, and a faint smile touched his lips.

“And with your spirit, Brother Dominic,” he said gently. “You walk early.”

“I could not rest,” Dominic admitted, sitting beside him. “My mind is full.”

Bartolomeo nodded knowingly, as if he had already expected this moment.

Dominic leaned closer, lowering his voice to a hush. “I found them. The Gospel of Mary. The Gospel of Thomas. I read them, or what remains of them.” He hesitated, but the need burned too strong. “What does it mean—the kingdom is within me?”

Bartolomeo exhaled slowly, his gaze turning out to the rising sun. “It is the oldest teaching, Brother. It means that the Divine is not in stones or gold, not in crowns nor cathedrals. It is within you, within the very fabric of your consciousness. You are the temple. The kingdom is not a place, but a state of knowing. A state of being.”

Dominic sat in silence for a moment. “Why have I never been told this?”

“Because it is not meant for all to hear,” Bartolomeo said softly. “Not all hearts are ready. Not all minds would bear it with humility. And the Church—” he looked around briefly, his voice dropping to a whisper, “—has spent centuries building its authority upon interpretation. These texts undo the hierarchy. They declare no priest, no pope, no intercessor is needed to find the light. Only the seeker, and the truth within.”

Dominic swallowed hard, his eyes flickering. “But… how do you and Brother Raimondo know these texts exist? They’re sealed away. You have no access to the archive.”

Bartolomeo's smile deepened slightly. "We have… ways. You are now one of us now, Brother. You have touched the hidden knowledge. You have begun the path."

Dominic stared at him.

"There are those in Rome," Bartolomeo continued, "who still follow these ancient truths. An order that has survived, deep in the roots of the city. They have passed the teachings quietly from hand to hand, voice to voice, always in danger, always hunted. Brother Raimondo and I were brought into this by… well, let us say, fortunate encounters. Fra Niccolò Spina is one of us too. Do not be fooled by his silence—he hears much, and speaks only in ink when it is safe."

Dominic's heart beat faster. "But… how can this be kept hidden for so long?"

Bartolomeo turned to him, serious now. "Because secrecy is survival. The Inquisition is always listening. Always sniffing for heresy. Gnostics have been tortured, burned, their works shredded, their names blotted out from every ledger. Even now, they comb the monasteries, they search the private libraries of nobles. Do you think it coincidence that these texts were hidden in the Secret Archive? They know. They *know* the power of these words. But they fear it. They hide it under lock and guard, because if this truth were common… the walls would fall."

Dominic whispered, "Then why keep them at all?"

Bartolomeo looked at him with a tired, yet kind expression. "Because part of them believes. Or perhaps because they know, deep in their marrow, that what is true cannot be destroyed forever. Fire cannot erase light. These texts are buried, yes, but not lost. Not yet."

Dominic sat back on the bench, stunned. "And now… what do I do?"

Bartolomeo's hand gently touched his arm. "You listen. You read. You watch. And above all —*you speak to no one about it, but us.* This is not a path for loud tongues or brave gestures. It is for those who walk softly, under heaven's eye. For the kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth, and men do not see it."

Dominic nodded slowly, his voice low. "I will speak to no one."

"Good," Bartolomeo said, folding his hands again. "Then the work begins."

The bell in the distance chimed softly over the gardens, in the distance Silent Brother stood in the shadow of a tree, watching them. Morning prayers would soon begin. Dominic stood with Bartolomeo, both men silent as the wind stirred the trees. The kingdom, Dominic thought again. The kingdom is within me. And now—he had opened the door.

The dining hall echoed with the scraping of wooden spoons and the low murmurs of the morning crowd. Dominic and Brother Bartolomeo entered in silence, as usual, and made their way to their accustomed seats at the long oaken table, where the morning offering awaited them: a bowl of half-cold rye porridge and a ladle of slightly sour goat milk.

Bartolomeo frowned slightly and reached under his robe, pulling out a small vial of olive oil. He uncorked it and drizzled a few drops over the grayish porridge.

“Makes this wretched slop slide down easier,” he muttered.

Dominic dipped his spoon reverently and began eating with calm pace.

“All food that nourishes is good,” he said mildly. “We eat to feed the body, not to serve the tongue. Taste is fleeting, the flesh always hungers again. What matters is strength to serve the Lord.”

Bartolomeo nodded, chewing. “Yes, yes. We are no princes. This is no house of oysters and snow-chilled cheeses. It is enough.”

A strange, wheezing croak came from their left. An unknown monk sat hunched beside Dominic, his cheeks puffed with porridge. A dribble of grain clung to his stubbled chin, and he chewed loudly, as if every bite might be his last.

Dominic glanced at him once and returned to his meal without a word.

Suddenly, the hall went still.

Father Lodovico Carafa, the Auditor of the Rota, strode in like a landed lion, his eyes surveying the humble crowd of monks and nuns as if they were the insects of God’s garden. He took his seat at the head of the table, where a special tray was brought to him—a roasted quail stuffed with herbs and pine nuts, with a small tart of honeyed dates on the side. Two toasted slices of black bread soaked in spiced olive oil sat beside a goblet of ruby wine, and a silver bowl of warm lentils steamed gently beside the plate.

Lodovico made the sign of the cross, murmured a swift Latin blessing—“Domine, benedic hoc cibo, et corda nostra ad tuam voluntatem converte.”—then immediately began to devour his feast.

Grease and juice trickled down his chin as he tore into the quail with fingers and teeth, wine sloshing into his mouth as he slurped between bites.

Halfway through the meal, he straightened, mouth still glistening, and turned to address the nearby monks and a few young nuns sitting to his right.

“Let it be known,” he began, voice rich and heavy, “that the gluttony of the soul is far worse than the gluttony of the flesh. A man may eat to sustain himself—” here he stuffed another date tart into his mouth, chewed, swallowed, then continued, “—but woe to the one who hungers for pride, envy, or knowledge beyond his station. It is better to starve the belly than to feed a mind that rebels against Holy Doctrine.”

A few heads bowed in solemn affirmation.

Dominic leaned to Bartolomeo and whispered, “Talk to you soon, brother.”

Bartolomeo nodded, still chewing. “Go well.”

Dominic entered the scriptorium where dust drifted through the morning light like soft snow. Parchments, scrolls, and books were everywhere—some stacked in precarious towers, others bursting from the wicker baskets in the corners. A lone book lay abandoned on the floor near a stool.

“Ah, Dominic,” Giuliano called, looking up from his desk, “we're drowning in ink and chaos. Can you sort these piles? Begin with the Roman shelves. That heap is beginning to look like the ruins of Carthage.”

Dominic bent to pick up the book on the floor. It was a thin volume titled “De Umbris Antiquitatis”—*On the Shadows of Antiquity*. The binding was cracked and the ink faded. He returned it to its rightful shelf, then began organizing the scrolls, smoothing crumpled edges, and untangling loose ribbon ties.

At the far end of the room, Giuliano dipped his quill into ink and began copying a papal decree with measured grace. But in the margins, his fingers scribbled small, altered words—playful substitutions for his own amusement:

“Beati pauperes spiritu” (*Blessed are the poor in spirit*) became *“Beati pauperes vino”* (*Blessed are the poor in wine*).

He chuckled silently and glanced over his shoulder, satisfied no one noticed.

Hours passed. The scriptorium was quiet but for the scratching of pens and the occasional snuff of a candle. Dominic resumed his copying work, today drawing from Diogenes Laertius' “Lives of the Philosophers.”

He carefully transcribed:

“Diogenes the Cynic, when asked what wine he preferred, said: That which belongs to another.”

“Aristippus, having fallen into a muddy ditch, said to his followers: Behold, even philosophy must walk carefully.”

“Plato defined man as a featherless biped, until Diogenes threw a plucked chicken into his Academy and declared: Behold—Plato’s man!”

Dominic smiled faintly at the absurdity, thinking how far these ancient thinkers wandered from the order of the Church. But still, he wrote diligently, copying every word with reverence and clarity.

Outside, the bells rang Terce. The day moved forward. And still the quills danced.

After a long day of scribing under the pale glow of candles and sun shafts piercing the high windows of the scriptorium, Dominic finally laid down his quill, gently blowing on the fresh

ink to dry. His hand ached slightly, but his heart was calm. The rhythm of the work, though demanding, had become his daily peace.

He rose, stretched his back with a quiet breath, and made his way to the dining hall for the evening meal. Tonight's fare was modest yet satisfying—slices of stewed vegetables glistening with olive oil, a small piece of salted fish, and a handful of ripe figs and dates arranged in a chipped wooden bowl. Dominic murmured a short blessing before eating:

"Benedic, Domine, nos et haec tua dona, quae de tua largitate sumus sumpturi."

He ate slowly, savoring the sweetness of the fruit, thinking over the words he had copied that day—words of ancient philosophers and holy scripture alike, all weaving in his mind like sacred threads.

As the last rays of sun kissed the dome of St. Peter's and the marble of the Basilica blushed gold, the familiar sound of the bell for Vespers tolled across the Vatican grounds. The time had come for the Liturgy of the Hours, the evening office—Dominic's favorite part of the day.

Inside the Basilica, the great stone nave glowed in the flickering light of hundreds of candles. The organ remained silent—this was a time for voices alone. Monks in dark robes filed solemnly into the choir stalls, each holding a taper, the flames swaying gently as they moved through the incense-sweetened air. Dominic took his place near the center, candle in hand, his face calm, serious.

The Prior raised his hand, and the Vespers began.

A solemn antiphon filled the echoing space:

"Deus, in adjutorium meum intende.
Domine, ad adjuvandum me festina."
(O God, come to my assistance. O Lord, make haste to help me.)

The monks responded, voices low but harmonious, reverent in every note.

Then followed the chanting of a Psalm, its ancient words rising with a rhythm that mirrored the slow heartbeat of the Church:

Psalm 141 (Vespers Psalm):

"Let my prayer rise before You like incense,
The lifting up of my hands like the evening sacrifice.
Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth;
Keep watch over the door of my lips.
Do not let my heart incline to any evil thing."

Dominic's voice was steady, trained, though not the most beautiful among the choir. But his eyes glistened in the golden light as he felt the sacred weight of the words.

Then came a hymn, simple and beloved:

“Te lucis ante terminum,
Rerum Creator, poscimus,
Ut pro tua clementia,
Sis praesul et custodia.”
(To Thee before the close of day, Creator of the world, we pray,
That with Thy wonted favor, Thou Wouldst be our guard and keeper now.)

The final notes floated like a breath across the nave, lingering in the stone arches, as if even the angels had paused to listen.

Dominic bowed his head deeply, candle still flickering in his hands. He whispered a quiet prayer in his heart:

“Lord, I seek only the truth. Let Your light shine within me, even if the path grows dark.”

The monks processed out slowly, silence wrapping around them like a cloak. Dominic, last among them, turned once to look upon the altar. Then he too disappeared into the shadows, his soul heavy with wonder and faith in equal measure.

The air in the grottoes was still, weighed down by the scent of wax, marble, and centuries-old dust. After the solemnity of Vespers, Dominic felt a pull to descend once again beneath the Basilica, to the place where bones lay in silence and the walls remembered every whisper.

There, kneeling alone in prayer before a dimly lit alcove, was Sister Caterina Farnese. Her veil cast soft shadows across her cheeks, and the candlelight flickered against the lines of weariness etched into her expression. Dominic approached gently, his sandals silent on the stone.

“Peace be with you, Sister Caterina,” he said quietly.

She turned to him with a small, almost reluctant smile. “And with your spirit, Brother Dominic.”

They spoke a moment in hushed tones, and then she gestured for him to follow. They walked slowly toward a tomb in one of the lateral chapels.

“This,” Caterina said, stopping before a grand sarcophagus, “holds the body of Pope Pius VI.”

Dominic took in the elaborate craftsmanship of the tomb. “It’s magnificent,” he said, studying the marble’s surface. “Ancient.”

She nodded. “The covering is from the 4th century, from the Basilica’s collection. See here—two winged spirits, or genii, holding a plaque for the inscription.” She gestured toward the left. “There is Joseph, being torn from the wall by his brothers and sold. And here…” she pointed to the right, “…one of the first images of the Epiphany.”

Dominic stared in awe. The composition was humble but profound—Mary seated on a draped throne, the Christ Child in her lap, the Three Magi bearing gifts with camels behind them. And behind Mary—a single, unornamented Latin cross.

Caterina's voice turned soft, reverent. "This is one of the earliest representations in Christian art of the Cross, Dominic. Child and Cross. Beginning and End. All in one image."

He was silent for a moment, then looked at her with concern. "How have you been, Caterina?" he asked. "Truly?"

Caterina's eyes lowered. Her hands clasped tightly in front of her. She hesitated. Then, finally, she whispered, "I… I must confess something."

Dominic tensed. "Go on."

Her voice shook. "Father Simeone Curzio… in the gardens… he… he forced himself on me. He put his hands—" she stopped, her voice cracking. "I tried to push him away, but he's stronger. I ran."

Dominic's face hardened with restrained anger. "Did he hurt you?"

"Not fully… but he left a mark on me, in more ways than one," she said. "Afterwards, he accused me of tempting him. He told another nun that I was a snare for weak men, that I provoked his fall. And now… I feel… vile. Defiled."

Dominic reached out, taking her hand gently. "You are not guilty, Caterina. That man is responsible for his own sin. Your body is not defiled by the acts of another. You are not to blame."

Tears brimmed in her eyes. "But I feel so… intruded. I feel unclean, Dominic."

He nodded slowly. "The body is born into filth, into the dust of this world, Caterina. It is through prayer and the light of Christ that we are made clean—not by what others do to us."

She was quiet, tears now flowing down her cheeks.

"There's something else," she said, her voice now a whisper of fear. "I've had another vision. A demon—dark, formless, came into my chambers at night. He demanded my submission. I was frozen… then I awoke."

She paused. "And every night, I see Simeone again in my dreams. I cannot escape him. It's as if his soul chases me."

Dominic took a deep breath and looked her in the eyes. "You must pray, Caterina. Pray with all your strength. Call on Christ. You are not alone in this. Perhaps these visions are a warning, or a sign… or a trial."

Caterina lowered her head. "Sometimes I wonder… if I'm being punished."

Dominic leaned closer. “No. You may be chosen, Caterina. Perhaps these visions come not to wound, but to reveal. You must be brave.”

She closed her eyes and nodded slowly. “I will pray.”

Dominic squeezed her hand gently. “And I will pray for you too.”

He left her there, kneeling before the tomb of Pius VI, the candlelight dancing on her pale face. The marble shadows watched in silence.

Dominic walked back to his chambers, heavy-hearted. He knelt at the foot of his bed and whispered into the darkness:

“Lord, watch over her. Guard her mind, her heart, her body. Let no darkness touch her soul.”

Then he opened his Bible, reading quietly from Psalm 27:

“The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?”

The candle beside him flickered.

He closed his eyes, and sleep came like a gentle veil.

A Visit

The first golden rays of the Roman sun filtered through the shutters of Dominic’s small chamber. He rose slowly, the sleep still clinging to his limbs. At the simple basin in the corner, he poured cold water from the jug, splashing it over his face and arms, the chill awakening him fully. After drying off with a coarse linen cloth, he knelt beside his cot and whispered his morning prayer:

“Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.” (Psalm 51:10)

Clothed in his brown monk’s habit, cinched with a worn cord at the waist, Dominic made his way toward the cloisters, the soft echo of sandals on stone accompanying him like a gentle rhythm. He found Brother Pietro della Rovere in the eastern portico, seated beneath an archway reading from a scroll.

Dominic bowed respectfully. “Brother Pietro, may I speak with you?”

Pietro glanced up, his weathered eyes kind. “Speak, Brother Dominic.”

“I wish to visit my parents in Trastevere, with your permission.”

Pietro paused, then smiled faintly. “Honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.” (Exodus 20:12)

He rolled the scroll carefully. “Go then, and return before sundown. The city is yours to walk, Brother, but the Lord’s work waits always.”

“Thank you, Brother,” Dominic said with a bow.

Passing under the arch of the Vatican Gate, Dominic reached the outer checkpoint where Brother Matteo Velluti, the gatekeeper of the Leonine Walls, sat scribbling entries into a thick ledger. A narrow-eyed man with quick fingers, Matteo looked up as Dominic approached.

“Off to the world, are you?”

“Yes, Brother. Trastevere. Visiting family.”

Matteo scribbled Dominic’s name, the date, and time into the ledger with a squeaking quill. “Be back before nightfall. The watch tightens after vespers.”

Dominic nodded and stepped out beyond the gates—into Rome.

The city greeted him like an old friend: full of sound, motion, and layered memory. The September morning was warm and fragrant, the sun casting amber tones across the ancient stones of the city’s buildings. Overhead, a clear blue sky stretched like a cathedral dome, and the distant tolling of bells echoed from countless steeples across the skyline.

He walked down the Borgo Pio, where the stone paving glistened faintly from last night’s dew. A woman with a basket of grapes crossed in front of him, her child skipping at her heels. Merchants were setting up small stalls: figs and dates stacked in pyramids, cheeses wrapped in linen, bread still steaming from underground ovens. The scent of rosemary and garlic wafted from a nearby doorway, where someone was already preparing stew.

Birdsong trickled down from the terracotta rooftops—swallows wheeling and chirping above him. A pair of white doves fluttered past, settling on a windowsill near a faded fresco of the Madonna.

As he reached the Ponte Sisto, the bridge that connected the Vatican side to Trastevere, Dominic paused and looked over the Tiber River. The water flowed gently, green and glinting with sunlight. On its banks, children threw stones, and an old man sat fishing with nothing but a stick and string.

Crossing into Trastevere, the quarter changed subtly—narrower streets, more intimate courtyards, a rougher charm. The walls here were cracked but alive with ivy. Laundry lines stretched from window to window. A cat blinked lazily from a sunlit ledge. Chatter in Latin and Roman dialect floated from the open shutters of an upper floor, where women were embroidering and gossiping in fast whispers.

He passed Santa Maria in Trastevere, where incense still clung to the columns from morning Mass, and then turned into a quiet side alley, past the old cobbler’s shop and the vine-covered wall where he once played as a child.

Finally, he stopped before a modest stone house with wooden shutters and a cracked terra-cotta roof. The door was as he remembered it—slightly crooked, with the old brass knocker in the shape of a lion's head. A clay pot of basil stood by the threshold, wilting a little in the sun.

He raised his hand, touched the door gently—and paused, heart filled with quiet anticipation.

His past was on the other side.

Knock-knock-knock.

The old wooden door creaked open, and **Lucia**, Dominic's mother, stood before him in her flour-dusted apron, the scent of baked bread clinging to her like perfume. Her eyes lit up immediately.

"Dio mio, Dominic!" she exclaimed, pulling him into a firm, motherly embrace. "Why knock, child? This is your home. You'll never need permission to come through this door."

Dominic smiled and embraced her back. "Old habits, mamma. In the monastery, I knock for everything. Even the silence."

She laughed and stepped aside, waving him in. "Come in, come in! You look thin. Come eat something."

Inside, the single dark room felt warm and familiar despite its cramped space and worn corners. The walls were patched with old plaster, and the wooden beams above were low enough that Dominic ducked as he entered. The floor, crooked and warped with age, still held echoes of his childhood games.

At the old table near the hearth, Matteo, his father, sat in his usual spot, chiseling a cracked wooden handle for a trowel. His hands, thick and calloused like the stone he worked, paused as he looked up.

"Well, the scholar returns." Matteo stood, brushing dust from his sleeves and gave Dominic a quick, firm handshake. "Still breathing, eh?"

"Still breathing, and still reading," Dominic smiled, sitting across from him.

Lucia set a plate of warm bread, some olives, and a wedge of goat cheese in front of her son. Dominic hungrily tore into the bread, dipping it in oil and popping olives in his mouth like a famished traveler.

"So, how have you been, figlio mio?" Lucia asked, watching him with motherly concern. "You look pale. Are they working you too hard?"

"I'm well," Dominic said between mouthfuls. "Things have changed. I'm no longer just carrying candles or scrubbing floors. I've been made a scribe's assistant. I work with ink and scrolls now. Reading every day."

Lucia clasped her hands together. “Grazie a Dio! You were always meant for books, not brooms.”

But Matteo snorted, leaning back in his chair with a creak.

“Scribe,” he said with a skeptical grunt. “So, you sit hunched over parchment all day like some old crow scratching symbols on bark?”

Dominic set the bread down, wiping his fingers on a cloth. “It’s more than that, father. I learn. I read from the minds of those long gone. The thoughts of emperors, saints, philosophers—”

“Bah!” Matteo waved a hand. “Thoughts won’t build a house. Or protect a man in battle. If you'd followed me or your uncle Flavio, you'd have arms like iron and a trade to stand on. Even the army would make a man of you. But scribbling letters? Ink can’t feed a family.”

Dominic’s jaw tightened slightly. “And chiseling stone leaves the body broken by forty. I’ve seen you wince each time you stand. I respect what you do, padre. But it’s not for me.”

“You calling me broken?” Matteo raised an eyebrow.

“No,” Dominic said quickly. “I’m saying I chose a different path. I walk with my back bent not from weakness, but from study. From devotion.”

Lucia stepped between them, gently placing a hand on both men’s shoulders. “Peace, both of you. One builds with stone, the other with words. Both leave something behind.”

Matteo grumbled, but didn’t push further. “At least your brothers had the good sense to follow something solid. They learn the trade well. One day, maybe they’ll inherit my tools.”

Dominic looked around the room—his childhood home, with its stained walls and crooked table. His eyes rested on a dusty crucifix above the bed, the one he had kissed each night before sleep as a boy.

“I remember this place more brightly,” he said softly.

Lucia smiled. “That’s because when we’re small, even the shadows are full of magic.”

Dominic looked at her, then back to his father, whose hands were already back to carving.

Despite the tension, there was love here. Tough, stubborn love.

And Dominic carried it like a stone in his chest.

As Dominic leaned back on the old stool, finishing the last of the bread and olives, Lucia began to chatter more freely, her voice soft and full of motherly pride.

“Your brothers are doing well, grazie a Dio. Antonio is working near the Basilica of San Giovanni in Laterano, helping restore the cloister arches. His hands are white with marble dust when he comes home, but he smiles like a man who knows his craft.”

Dominic nodded. “He always had the strength for heavy work.”

“And Sebastiano, he’s been carving reliefs for a private chapel near Piazza Navona, something commissioned by the Orsini family, I believe. They say he’s good with cherubs and vines.”

“Cherubs and vines,” Dominic repeated with a small laugh. “Sounds like Sebastiano would’ve made a good painter too.”

“They both send coin regularly,” Lucia added, her fingers tightening over the clay cup she held. “Your father and I may even move from this old place. A better room, closer to the river. Sebastiano says we can even afford a tiled stove if we’re lucky.”

“Let me know if you do,” Dominic said warmly. “I’ll write, or maybe come again before winter.”

Lucia reached out and brushed a lock of hair from his forehead, the way she used to when he was a boy. “You pray often son, don’t you?”

“Every day,” Dominic said. “Sometimes I even believe it reaches beyond the stone walls.”

Matteo looked up from his carving. “Do they still make you chant psalms till your throat dries?”

“Every evening,” Dominic replied. “Some of the older monks fall asleep during the Liturgy. I keep mine open in case I have to hold the candle.”

They all laughed softly at that, and for a time, they simply spoke like a family. Lucia told of a neighbor’s daughter getting married, and how she had begged to borrow the old veil from Lucia’s chest. Matteo complained about the cobbler downstairs, who pounded his hammer at all hours and once kept him awake by singing until midnight.

Even the simple gossip felt like balm to Dominic’s soul.

After a while, the sun had begun to lower across the city roofs. Dominic stood and stretched his limbs, embracing his mother tightly.

“I’ll return when I can,” he said, then turned to his father. “And I’ll always carry our name with pride, even if I carry ink instead of stone.”

Matteo simply grunted and gave him a pat on the shoulder. “Keep your back straight, boy. No one respects a crooked monk.”

Dominic grinned. “Yes, father.”

A City of Fathers and Stones

As Dominic stepped out into the golden Roman sunlight, the warmth clung to his shoulders like a blessing. The streets of Trastevere hummed with life — children running barefoot between fruit stalls, nuns walking with baskets of bread, merchants unloading crates of salted fish, the occasional bark of a dog echoing in a stone alleyway.

He crossed the Tiber River over the Ponte Sisto, the wide current gleaming below. The breeze from the fields outside Rome slipped between the buildings, carrying with it the earthy scent of tilled soil and grapevines from afar.

He wandered aimlessly at first, simply letting the city speak to him.

The Palazzo Farnese loomed ahead in stern grandeur. He stopped to admire its powerful symmetry and thick stone cornices. "Perhaps Antonio carved some of those blocks," Dominic thought.

Nearby, the Campo de' Fiori was bustling with vendors shouting and hawking herbs and vegetables. The square once soaked with blood during executions now bloomed with color and smell.

He turned eastward, letting his steps carry him past Sant'Andrea della Valle, its dome soaring above the skyline. "I remember copying a scroll about its dedication," he murmured to himself. "So much gold spent for a crown of stone."

He passed the Pantheon, the dome mighty as ever, a monument that had outlived empires and still stood silently, swallowing the light in its oculus. "What hands," Dominic thought, "laid those stones before Christ was even born?"

Then came the Piazza Venezia, the towering façade of the Palazzo Venezia casting long shadows over the cobblestones. As he walked, his eyes followed the reliefs, the statues, the inscriptions — messages from ages past etched into marble.

"I am surrounded by the words and hands of Rome," Dominic thought. "My father laid stones. My brothers carve the facades. But I — I carve memory into parchment. That, too, is a kind of building."

The voices of the crowds faded behind him. He reached Via della Conciliazione, the long stretch leading back toward the Leonine Walls and the Vatican. In the fading afternoon light, the dome of St. Peter's caught fire with gold.

Dominic stood there for a while, watching the dome that had seen the lives of popes, martyrs, heretics, and saints rise and fall — just as the sun now dipped behind it.

His heart beat slower now.

Not from fatigue, but from awe.

And a question.

“Am I a builder of God’s truth… or a scribe of secrets buried in the stones?”

He turned and walked, the marble of Rome whispering beneath his feet.

The sky over the Vatican was beginning to shift into the golden hues of late afternoon as Dominic passed again through the Leonine Walls, greeted by the ever-stern Brother Matteo Velluti, Gatekeeper of the Holy City.

Matteo squinted down at the logbook, then up at Dominic’s dust-marked robes. “Returned?” he said flatly, quill already scribbling.
“Back, safe and grateful,” Dominic replied.

With that, Dominic entered once more into the stone embrace of St. Peter’s, a place both towering and tightening in its beauty.

Not long after, he found Sister Caterina Farnese near the grottoes again. She was kneeling in prayer, her thin fingers flickering over her rosary like silent birds in flight. When she saw him, her eyes brightened, and she rose.

“Walk with me?” she asked.

Dominic offered his arm. They ascended quietly into the Basilica proper, the immensity of the sacred space expanding around them like the sky turned to marble. The air carried the mingling scents of candle wax, dust, and incense still hanging from morning rites.

They stopped before Michelangelo’s Pietà, resting within the right aisle. For a long while, neither spoke.

The Virgin Mary, forever frozen in grief, cradled the lifeless Christ in her arms. The folds of her robe—carved in Carrara marble—cascaded like waves of sorrow, soft and flowing though made of stone. Christ’s body, pale and lean, rested with a tenderness that felt somehow still alive.

“She was younger than I imagined,” Dominic said softly.

“She is,” Caterina whispered. “Michelangelo sculpted her youthful on purpose. He said that the sinless do not age.”

Dominic furrowed his brow, surprised. “And he was only twenty-four when he carved this.”

Caterina nodded. “Some say he locked himself inside the chapel for days. No apprentice, no assistance. Only marble. And mourning.”

“And genius,” Dominic added.

From there, they walked together toward the center of the Basilica, where Bernini’s Baldachin rose in all its grandeur.

Its colossal twisted Solomonic columns, almost black in their bronze, seemed to coil like vines reaching toward heaven. The canopy above them glinted in the candlelight they themselves now helped ignite—Dominic carefully holding the flame as Caterina lit each taper one by one.

As the flames flickered, she leaned closer and began to speak.

“Bernini’s altar… his dream made real,” she said with reverence. “He began in 1623, just a young man in service to Urban VIII. They say he would come here late at night, laying sketches on the stone like prayers.”

“I’ve heard stories,” Dominic said. “But seeing it... it’s like staring into a storm caught mid-surge.”

“The spiraling columns are said to echo the Temple of Solomon,” Caterina continued, her voice gentle, “Eight of them were salvaged from the old basilica. People believed they came from Jerusalem, from the Temple itself. But…”

She hesitated, looked around.

Dominic leaned in.

She lowered her voice. “The truth is… they were likely Greek. Constantine’s gifts, not Solomon’s.”

Dominic tilted his head. “Why the myth, then?”

“Because people need a link to the divine,” Caterina said, her voice laced with irony and sadness. “To say the pope stands beneath Solomon’s columns makes him Moses, Aaron, and David at once.”

She turned her gaze up to the underside of the canopy, where golden beams radiated from the dove of the Holy Spirit.

“It is said the Holy Spirit resides here,” she murmured. “Hovering, watching as the Pope offers Mass. But…”

Again her voice dropped. “Contemporary whispers claim Urban VIII stripped the Pantheon’s portico to make this—melted ancient Roman bronze to glorify the Church.”

Dominic frowned. “Desecrating old temples to exalt the new...?”

“A pattern repeated in every age,” she said.

They stood there for a while, the candles glowing around them, their tiny lights swallowed by the immensity of the altar above.

Dominic stared at the spiraling columns again, now seeing them not just as symbols of divine order—but of power. Of empire. Of transformation.

“God in the light,” he thought, “but also in the shadows.”

He turned to Caterina, her face calm in the candlelight.

“I wonder,” he said quietly, “do you ever feel… that all this glory hides something?”

Caterina looked at him, her gaze deep and knowing.

“All the time,” she said.

They stood together in silence.

Then, slowly, they walked away.

After lighting a final candle at the altar, Dominic and Sister Caterina Farnese made their way slowly back toward the Basilica entrance, voices lowered in the hush of evening.

“I shall pray for you, Sister,” Dominic said as they stepped beneath the great arches, warm torchlight dancing along the polished marble walls. “Keep a cheerful mind. Even in the deepest night, the spirit must seek the light.”

Caterina turned to him and smiled—soft and luminous like the faintest halo.

“You sound like an angel yourself sometimes,” she said, voice tinged with both sadness and sweetness. “I will keep that close to heart.”

They parted beneath the shadow of a crucifix. Caterina moved down the cloister corridor, her veil fluttering like wings, while Dominic, feeling a tightness in his throat, cleared his voice and coughed.

It felt dry. Sore. A cold, perhaps.

He decided to make his way to the small apothecary chambers behind the Basilica, where healing was brewed in silence and steam.

The door creaked open, and Dominic stepped into the humid sanctuary of Sister Beatrice della Scala.

Her chambers were low and dim, lit by greenish oil lamps that swung gently overhead. The air was thick with herbal smoke and fragrant oils. On every wall hung bundles of drying herbs—Salvia officinalis, Thymus vulgaris, Mentha piperita, and Foeniculum vulgare, all labeled neatly on hanging parchment tags. Their scents mingled, overwhelming and strangely soothing.

A large oak table, carved deep with age and stained with oils, was covered in open books, scrolls, jars, mortar and pestles, cloth satchels of dried roots and seeds, and sharp knives for trimming. Copper kettles steamed over low coals at the hearth, and from the rafters hung small satchels of dried flowers—Calendula, Matricaria chamomilla, and Hyoscyamus niger—their long-dead petals fragile as dust.

Beatrice stood over a steaming pot, hood back, sleeves rolled up. Her expression was focused and severe.

“Peace, Sister,” Dominic said, coughing softly into his sleeve. “I fear I may have caught something in the cold basilica air.”

She didn’t look up. “Sore throat?” she asked flatly, reaching for a corked vial without hesitation.

“Like swallowing ashes.”

She approached and placed a yellowish-brown liquid into his hands. The glass was warm. “Twice a day. Morning and before bed. You’ll taste honey, but the bite is thyme, mullein, and Glycyrrhiza glabra—liquorice root. It will clear the heat from your throat.”

Dominic uncorked it slightly and sniffed. “Smells like the bitter end of a good memory.”

“Good medicine should not delight the tongue,” Beatrice said, going back to her work.

Dominic hesitated, then stepped closer, eyes scanning the walls. “Sister, may I ask... how long have you practiced this art?”

“Since I was twelve,” she replied, adding dried roots into a bubbling brew. “My mother was a midwife. My aunt a herbalist in Siena. I joined the convent to avoid being burned like her.”

Dominic blinked. “They burned her?”

“She healed too many people. It made the wrong men afraid.” Her tone was without emotion.

“I... I did not know,” he whispered.

Beatrice glanced at him for the first time. “You’re a scribe now. Learn this as well. The body obeys its poisons and its balms.”

Dominic nodded, stepping beside a hanging bundle of Atropa belladonna. “And this one?” he asked. “I’ve seen it in pictures. Is it not deadly?”

“It is,” she said. “Belladonna—beautiful lady. Causes hallucinations and slows the heart. A drop can calm spasms. A second drop can stop the breath. Do you see the line?”

“I see it.”

“Most do not,” she said. “Even in the Church.”

“And that?” he asked, pointing to another bundle.

“Leonurus cardiaca—Motherwort,” she said. “A tonic for the heart. And this,” she motioned to a jar of thinly sliced bark, “is Salix alba—white willow. Soaks pain from the blood..”

Dominic was captivated. “You speak of these things like... spells.”

“They are not spells, Brother,” she said sternly. “They are God’s tools, growing from His earth. You’ve just been taught to fear what you don’t control.”

Dominic nodded solemnly, holding the vial close. “Thank you, Sister. For the aid. And the words.”

She nodded curtly. “Go. Take the dose. And silence your throat before you silence your mind.”

With a parting cough and a grateful smile, Dominic stepped out, the warm herbal air clinging to his robes like incense.

The vial tucked in his pocket, he returned to the corridors of stone and scripture.

The Basilica loomed in silence, its shadows long and still beneath the moonlight filtering faintly through the high clerestory windows. Dominic, feeling restless even after his visit to Sister Beatrice and the numbing medicine she had given him, descended once more into the Vatican Grottoes. The marble corridors and ancient tombs had become strangely comforting to him—like walking through the memories of the Church itself.

The lanterns burned low in the sconces, flickering gently, casting dancing lights over stone effigies and worn Latin inscriptions.

As he walked, he saw a lone figure ahead. A silhouette moving among the tombs with a slow, deliberate step.

Brother Carlo Manetti, Grave Attendant, held a wrought-iron lantern, its dim glow illuminating his narrow, pale face. He looked like a man halfway into the other world, draped in dark robes and trailing silence like a veil.

Dominic approached quietly. “Peace be with you, Brother Carlo.”

Carlo turned his head slowly, the flame catching in his eyes. His face was calm—almost expressionless—but something about him felt... detached, like cold stone beneath one's fingers.

“Peace also to you, Brother Dominic.” His voice was soft, as if speaking too loudly might wake the dead. “What draws you here so late? This is an hour for sleep... or for spirits.”

Dominic smiled faintly. “I couldn’t sleep. The grottoes are quiet at night. I like the stillness. The stones speak more than the people sometimes.”

Carlo gave a slow nod, as if Dominic had said something profound.

“They do speak, these stones. But not only stones.”

Dominic tilted his head, half unsure if he heard right. “You mean... the dead?”

Carlo raised his lantern and looked around the sarcophagi. His voice grew quieter still.

“Sometimes, when I walk among them… I hear their whispers. Not with ears, but with the air. As though thoughts hang between the marble slabs like incense, only the living don’t notice it.”

Dominic stared at him, unsure whether to feel awe or unease. “Since when have you felt such things?”

“Since my first week in this post,” Carlo said. “I was tending to the sarcophagus of Pope Julius II, and I swear—on my soul—I heard a voice murmur from beneath the seal. It wasn’t Latin. It wasn’t language. It was... grief. Memory.”

Dominic stepped slightly closer, curiosity overtaking his doubts.

“I believe in the afterlife,” Dominic said. “In souls and the resurrection. But… can they reach the living?”

Carlo looked directly at him now. His lantern flame trembled as though stirred by breath unseen.

“They already have.”

Dominic’s breath hitched.

Carlo continued, “Some souls stay behind not because they are denied Heaven, but because they cannot bear to leave what is left undone. They watch. They weep. Some warn.”

He looked around, sweeping the lantern toward a tomb carved with angels.

“Not all voices are kind, Dominic. There are powers beneath the earth—some holy… others not.”

A shiver traced up Dominic’s back. Was it Carlo’s words—or the cool, silent air wrapping around his robe?

“Have you seen them?” Dominic asked, barely above a whisper.

Carlo’s lips barely moved. “I have heard enough. Seeing... that comes to those who are chosen.”

Dominic swallowed and looked around, his eyes falling on ancient inscriptions worn smooth by time. Souls trapped. Secrets buried. Whispers in the stone.

“I should return to my cell,” Dominic said gently. “It’s… late.”

Carlo nodded. “Sleep with one ear open, Brother. The dead may not knock, but they sometimes whisper.”

Dominic gave him a parting nod and turned. His steps were faster than when he had arrived.

As he reached his chamber, he shut the wooden door quietly behind him. The vial from Beatrice stood by his bed. He took a sip, then knelt to pray.

He opened his Bible, seeking reassurance.

He read softly:

"For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first."
—1 Thessalonians 4:16

He recited it twice, hand on his heart. Then slowly, he blew out the candle.

The room was swallowed by darkness. But even in the silence, the thought lingered:

The dead may not knock… but they sometimes whisper.

The first light of dawn poured over the Vatican rooftops in golden haze as **Dominic** woke, washed with cold water from the basin, and knelt by his bed. He whispered the morning prayer from Psalm 143:

"Cause me to hear thy lovingkindness in the morning; for in thee do I trust: cause me to know the way wherein I should walk; for I lift up my soul unto thee."

After breakfast—a wedge of barley bread and a sip of watered wine—he made his way to the scriptorium. Giuliano, hunched already over a manuscript, barely looked up.

"Dominic," Giuliano said, flicking a small list toward him, "fetch these from the Vatican Library and the Archive. The sooner the better."

Dominic picked up the list, reading the neat ink:

- *De Christi Stigmatibus*
- *Chronicon Ecclesiae Ravennatis*
- *Epistola Clementis VIII ad Regem Hispaniae*
- *Miracula Sanctae Euphrosynae*
- *Apologia contra Haereses Orientis*

Dominic raised a brow. "The letter from Pope Clement VIII to the King of Spain? That's… highly classified."

Giuliano only smirked and waved a hand. "It's needed for review. Don't ask questions. Bring it back sealed."

His first stop was the Vatican Library, its towering aisles like cathedrals of parchment and ink. He approached a small table near a locked cabinet where Father Giacomo Bardi, the Head Librarian, hunched over a crumbling manuscript like it were a fragile lover.

Giacomo didn't look up.

"Yes?"

"Peace, Father Bardi," Dominic said softly. "I was sent for *Miracula Sanctae Euphrosynae*. It's kept behind the locked shelf."

Giacomo finally looked up, his face lined like old vellum.

"Ah, Euphrosyne," he muttered. "A text the Spaniards once wanted burned. Superstition mixed with miracle… all wrapped in noble perfume."

He stood with a heavy sigh and shuffled to the shelf, muttering Latin under his breath. As he unlocked the case, he whispered low:

"Books are like souls, Brother Dominic. Some scream when they burn."

Dominic blinked. "Excuse me?"

Giacomo only gave a cryptic smile and handed him the leather-bound volume. "Be careful with it."

Next, Dominic descended into the Archivum Secretum Vaticanum, its walls colder, the air denser, the light dimmer than anywhere else in the Vatican. He passed rows of sealed cabinets and chambers behind thick wooden doors until he came to a desk where Canon Raffaele Orsini, the Keeper of the Secret Archives, sat like a marble lion before his treasure.

Dominic bowed his head. "Canon Orsini. I've come for the letter of Pope Clement VIII addressed to King Philip III of Spain. Dated—"

"I know the one," Orsini cut in, voice clipped. "It is not in the open archive. It's sealed."

He stood slowly, his robes rustling like dead leaves, and moved toward a massive, dust-coated binding on a shelf. He flipped through it with thick fingers.

"Not here," he muttered, frowning. "Then it must be..."

He turned to a side door—iron-bound, small, carved with papal seals. From a pouch on his belt, he took two bronze keys and inserted them into separate locks. The door groaned open.

"Wait here," he said to Dominic, narrowing his eyes. "This room is not for wandering eyes."

Dominic nodded and clasped his hands patiently, watching as Orsini disappeared into the shadowed chamber.

An hour passed.

Finally, the Canon emerged, carrying a rolled scroll in a crimson wax-sealed case.

“Handle it carefully,” Orsini said. “And return it the same. No copies. No commentary.”

“Understood,” Dominic said. “I still need to retrieve two more from the standard archive.”

Orsini gave a curt nod. “Then I leave you to it,” he said, locking the door behind him with the twin keys before walking off into the next chamber.

Dominic moved down the aisles. Dust tickled his nose. The smell of ancient paper and mold grew heavier. He passed familiar shelves, but then he noticed something.

A barred section. Iron rods sealed off a dark corner of the archive. A gate door hung half-ajar. The lock dangled, unlatched.

Dominic stepped closer. The bronze placard above the archway was tarnished and nearly unreadable. No name. No title. Only a faded symbol: a winged lion with no eyes.

A chill ran down his back. He looked over his shoulder. Alone. He hesitated… then gripped the iron gate, pushing it inward.

It creaked open.

Inside were rows of dust-choked shelves. No candles. No names. Just **silence**. He whispered to himself: “*Should I enter where no light dares dwell?*”

His foot crossed the threshold. He was inside.

The silence of the barred archive wrapped around Dominic like a burial shroud. The dust clung to the air and to his breath.
He moved between the shelves, deeper still, until his eyes caught a thick, iron-clasped binding, spine cracked with age.

In faded gold lettering across blackened leather:

“Processus contra Templarios: 1307–1312”
(*Trials Against the Templars*)

Dominic’s throat tightened. He pulled the heavy volume from the shelf with both hands, setting it down upon a stone pedestal caked in old wax and dust.

He opened it.

Inside, aged parchment writ in dark brown ink bled stories of fire and confession.

Dominic’s eyes scanned the text—Latin, scrawled by tribunal scribes. He whispered aloud as he read:

“Anno Domini 1309, interrogatus frater Hugo de Peraudo, confessus est sub tormentis quod fratres in initiatione sua negabant Christum et conspuebant in crucem...”

(*In the year of Our Lord 1309, Brother Hugo de Peraudo, under torment, confessed that during their initiation, the brothers denied Christ and spat upon the cross.*)

Dominic flinched.

"...et quod adoraverunt caput barbatus, quem vocaverunt Baphometum."
(*...and that they adored a bearded head, which they called Baphomet.*)

Another entry, dated later, caught his eye.

"Sub silentio noctis, unus frater confessus est coram inquisitoribus quod inter secretissima documenta templi, codex invenitur qui docet verbum Salvatoris aliter quam canon."
(*In the silence of night, one brother confessed before the inquisitors that among the most secret documents of the Temple, there exists a codex which teaches the words of the Savior differently than the canon.*)

Dominic's hand trembled as he turned the page.

"Nonnulli fratres mentionem fecerunt de libro, 'Veritas Lucis', in quo revelatur quod regnum Dei non sit in ecclesia, sed in homine ipso."
(*Several brothers made mention of a book, 'The Truth of Light', in which it is revealed that the Kingdom of God is not in the Church, but within man himself.*)

A scribal note followed in red ink:

"Haec verba sapiunt gnosticismum. Damnanda et comburenda."
(*These words reek of Gnosticism. To be condemned and burned.*)

Dominic felt a chill climb up his spine. His eyes darted forward.

Another confession:

"Frater Gerardus de Molay, Magister Ordinis, negavit accusationes, sed tandem confessus est sub cruciatu quod quidam in ordine sciebant arcanum quod si revelaretur, thronus Petri concuteretur."
(*Brother Gerard de Molay, Master of the Order, denied the accusations, but under torture finally confessed that some in the Order knew a secret which, if revealed, would shake the throne of Peter.*)

Another marginal note by a papal scribe:

"Silentium mandatum est. Haec non publicanda. Periculum fidei."
(*Silence has been ordered. These are not to be published. A danger to the faith.*)

Dominic whispered, "*A danger... to the throne of Peter...*"

His breath caught as he read one final chilling line—scribbled in trembling hand:

“Vidimus librum illum. Non a Deo, nec a diabolo. Sed ab antiqua scientia. Oret ecclesia.” (*We saw that book. It is not from God, nor from the devil. But from ancient knowledge. Let the Church pray.*)

Dominic’s heart thumped in his chest.

He stood there for a long moment, staring at the trembling, inked warning, the heavy silence pressing against his ears.

Then slowly… carefully… he closed the book.

And placed it back.

Dominic’s fingers ran along the next spine. Unlike the fat binding of the *Templar Trials*, this was slim, worn, and cracked with age. It bore a title in faded Latin:

“Causa Fratris Martino – Anno Domini 1214”
(*The Case of Brother Martino – Year of Our Lord 1214*)

He opened it gently, the parchment inside brittle and yellowed. A crimson wax seal had once been broken to open it.

“Testimonium Fratris Paulus: ‘Vidi eum sub terra, in umbra lucernae, verba murmurantem super ossa. Dicebat se vocare spiritum Petri beati. Audivi tonitrua, et terra subsilivit. Odorem sulfuris postea sensit omnis chorus. In lapide sanguineus macula manet.’”
(Testimony of Brother Paulus: “I saw him beneath the earth, by lantern light, murmuring words over bones. He said he was calling up the spirit of Blessed Peter. I heard thunder, and the ground shook. The whole choir later smelled sulfur. A red stain remains in the stone.”)

“Mandatum est ut corpus eius non sepeliatur in terra sacra. Decretum est: damnatio perpetua, memoria deleatur.”
(It was ordered that his body not be buried in sacred ground. It is decreed: eternal condemnation, memory erased.)

Dominic stared, breath slowing.

“He tried to summon the spirit of Peter…”

He looked up from the page.

“*But… where? What catacombs? I’ve seen no mention… no access beneath this basilica beyond the grottoes…*”

He whispered to himself, looking at the stone beneath his feet.

“*There must be more… deeper.*”

Setting the parchment aside, he reached for another thin binding beside it.

“Concilium Umbrae – Saeculum XIV”
(*Council of the Shadow – 14th Century*)

He opened it slowly. Inside, a script much neater, official—yet smudged in places as if written in haste.

“In nocte lunae obscurae, congregati sunt sex cardinales in sacrario secreto. Nullum papam agnoverunt. Visiones et signa caeli eos coegerunt dicere: papa electus est in erroribus.”
(On the night of a dark moon, six cardinals gathered in a secret sacristy. They recognized no pope. Visions and signs in the heavens compelled them to say: the elected pope is in error.)

“Reliquiae antiqua sub altari inventae—gladius sine scuto, cum scriptura: ‘Veniet iterum, sed non in pace.’”
(Ancient relics were found beneath the altar—a sword without a scabbard, with an inscription: ‘He shall come again, but not in peace.’)

“Epistola Cardinalis Lucensis: ‘Oculi eius viderunt Seraphim in fumis. Dixit: vox in absida clamavit nomen falsi papae. Ego interfui.’”
(Letter of Cardinal of Lucca: ‘His eyes beheld a Seraph in the smoke. He said: a voice in the apse cried out the name of the false pope. I was there.’)

“Postridie, unus eorum evanuit. Sanguis in gradibus sacelli. Concilium dissolutum. Silentium imperatum.”
(The next day, one of them vanished. Blood on the steps of the chapel. The council dissolved. Silence was decreed.)

Dominic could hardly breathe.

“A council of cardinals… visions, omens, relics… A sword beneath the altar? Who would dare?”

He turned—something had caught his eye.
A wooden box near the bottom of the shelf, half-buried in dust. Curious, he knelt and opened it.

Inside: brittle scrolls, wax seals, tied ribbons. One scroll unbound and titled in thick script:

“Prophētia Barberini – circa 1621”
(*The Barberini Prophecy – around 1621*)

Dominic unrolled the scroll slowly.

“In consilio secreto sub pontificatu Urbani VIII, astrologi consulti sunt. Stellas interpretantes, dixerunt: Roma ardebit. Columnae cadem cadent in nocte fumorum.”
(In secret counsel under the pontificate of Urban VIII, astrologers were consulted. Interpreting the stars, they said: Rome shall burn. Her same columns will fall in a night of smoke.)

“Pontifex turbatus, sed iussit silentium. Scriptum comburatur. Verbum servetur solum hic.”
(The Pontiff was disturbed but ordered silence. The script to be burned. Let the word be kept only here.)

“Si veritas effundatur, domus Barberini ruet sicut domus Achab.”
(If the truth is poured forth, the House of Barberini shall fall like the House of Ahab.)

Dominic whispered aloud:

“‘Roma ardebit… Rome shall burn…’”

He slowly rolled the scroll shut, hands numb.

For a moment, he sat on the floor of the archive—among the dust of secrets, beneath the vaulted stone of the Vatican.

He had entered a library.

He now sat in a graveyard of truths.

Dominic’s hand reached again into the wooden box.

He pulled out a brittle parchment folder titled:

Archivum Curiae – Suppressus, Anno Domini 1587
(Curia Archive – Suppressed, Year of Our Lord 1587)

Inside, a brief but chilling entry, written in sharp, formal Latin, marked with a red wax seal.

“Querela: mater e regione Transtiberim — filius suus, decem annos natus, disparuit postquam servivit in choro basilicae. Plures tales relationes notatae. Inquisitio cessavit iussu Cardinalis Santori. Familiis eleemosynae datae pro silentio. Archivum clausum. Causa: Nullus.”
(Complaint: A mother from the district of Trastevere—her son, aged ten, disappeared after serving in the basilica choir. Several similar reports noted. Investigation ceased by command of Cardinal Santori. Families were silenced with alms. File marked: Nullus.)

Dominic’s jaw clenched.

“*Children... going missing. On Vatican grounds?*”

His breath caught in his throat. The image of the **cistern** came back—the dead choirboys found drowned.

“*There’s a pattern… someone knows… and someone is silencing them.*”

He set the document down with shaking hands, glancing around the barred chamber as if afraid someone might appear.

Then he saw it—another binding, darker than the others, etched in cracked gold:

Le Dragon Rouge – The Grand Grimoire

Dominic hesitated. His hands almost refused. But something compelled him—dread and curiosity now inseparable.

He opened the Grand Grimoire.

The smell of sulfur seemed to rise from the pages.

Drawings filled the first folios—sigils, strange glyphs, diagrams for pentacles and ceremonial daggers, circles of protection, and names unlike any he'd read in scripture:

Lucifer. Beelzebub. Astaroth.

Each associated with elaborate rituals and oaths.

Then came the words.

"Luciferus Imperator, Magister ac Princeps Spirituum Rebellium, te adiuro: egredere de habitaculo tuo, ubicumque sit, et huc venias ad colloquendum mecum."
(Emperor Lucifer, Master and Prince of Rebellious Spirits, I adjure thee: leave thine abode, wherever it may be, and come here to speak with me.)

"Praecipio tibi et te coniuro in Nomine Dei viventis, Patris, Filii, et Spiritus Sancti: ut appareas sine strepitu et sine foetore, respondeas clara voce, ad omnia quae te interrogabo."
(I command and conjure thee in the Name of the living God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost: appear without noise and without stench, respond clearly to all that I ask thee.)

Further:

"Ego sum repraesentans Emanuelem, Filius unicus Dei. Te constringo, in virtute Sanguinis pretiosi quem effudit ad redimendum genus humanum."
(I am the representative of Emmanuel, the only Son of God. I bind thee, by the power of His precious blood, shed to redeem mankind.)

Dominic's hands trembled violently. He flipped through pages—many in French, others in Latin.

Diagrams for rituals. Instructions for necromancy, speaking with the dead. Spells for lottery wins, seduction, invisibility, demonic contracts.

He read aloud, barely above a whisper:

"Le Secret Magique, ou Le Grand Art de Parler aux Morts…"
(The Magic Secret, or the Grand Art of Speaking to the Dead.)

His mind reeled.

"*Why is this… here? Why…*"

"*Why does the Church guard this? Who uses this? Priests? Cardinals?*"

He snapped the book closed.

Even the dust on the cover seemed to recoil.

He looked around the barred chamber, its dimness growing more oppressive.

"*These are not myths. They are… preserved. Protected. Why? To study? Or to use?*"

Dominic's heartbeat pounded in his ears.

"*If men of God open these texts… what does that make them? What is truly hidden beneath this holy rock?*"

He placed the book back on the shelf, slowly, deliberately.

Then, in silence, he turned back toward the exit.

As he walked toward the iron gate, he cast one last glance behind him—

and swore the sigils on the page still burned behind his eyes.

Dominic stepped into the scriptorium after returning from the Archive, his hands still carrying the scrolls Giuliano had ordered. He handed them over without a word, the weight of what he'd read in the barred chamber pressing heavily on his mind.

Giuliano barely looked up.
"Good. Settle yourself down. You've got letters from Bishop Malvasia to rewrite and a Roman land dispute decree to copy. Try not to fall asleep mid-line this time, yes?"

Dominic sat down at his desk. The hours passed quietly, his quill scratching across the parchment. But his thoughts were elsewhere—still flickering with words from *Le Dragon Rouge*, still hearing the cries of the Trastevere mother whose child vanished into the black of silence.

By midday, the bell for lunch echoed through the stone halls, and Dominic stepped out into the warmth of the dining hall. The scent of boiled grains and vinegar greeted him. He joined Brothers Raimondo and Bartolomeo at a long wooden table where they were already eating.

Raimondo looked up.
"Brother Dominic. You look pale. Too much dust in the Archive or too much sin in the air?"

Bartolomeo smirked, tearing a piece of dry bread.
"Or both. Welcome to lunch—porridge again, this time flavored with despair."

Dominic sat down and offered a tired smile.
"I'll eat anything that doesn't smell like lamp oil."

Just then, a tall, slender man in fine black clerical robes swept into the hall. His sharp features and hawk-like eyes turned more than a few heads. Monsignor Lorenzo Vitelli, Secretary of Apostolic Briefs, approached with a confident glide and without waiting for an invitation, sat directly beside Bartolomeo.

Lorenzo wiped an invisible speck from his sleeve and looked across the table at Dominic with a narrow smile.

"Ah. *The new assistant to the assistant.* How quaint. Tell me, Brother Dominic, are you finding enough time to copy without smearing your ink or your soul?"

Dominic straightened his back slightly.
"I do my best to keep both clean, Monsignor."

Lorenzo sniffed and took a small bite of salted fish, chewing it slowly.

"Good. You see, silence is the bedfellow of scribes. Loose tongues birth miscopied truths. And in this palace of holiness, one misplaced word can mean excommunication—or promotion."
(He smirked.)
"But of course, you're still at the stage of deciphering your own handwriting."

Bartolomeo sipped his wine in silence, barely hiding the curve of a grin.

Lorenzo continued, eyeing Dominic's cup with a sniff of disdain.

"Drink carefully, Brother. Even our Lord asked for water and received vinegar."

He stood up, brushing down his robes though no dust had touched them.

"Enjoy your porridge. Some of us must return to our desks and shape the voice of the Pope himself."

He gave a small bow with exaggerated grace, then turned on his heel and walked out with his nose raised as if the very air offended him.

Silence hung for a moment—then Bartolomeo leaned over with a deadpan expression and whispered:

"You know, I once saw him bless his own reflection in a silver plate."

Raimondo burst into laughter, nearly choking on his wine.

Dominic smirked, shaking his head.
"I thought I saw him once kiss a mirror."

Bartolomeo added with a mockingly pious tone:

"*And lo, the Word became flesh and took the form of Monsignor Vitelli.*"

They all laughed quietly, careful not to be too loud—but the laughter felt good, like lifting a weight off the soul.

Raimondo leaned closer, nudging Dominic.

"Careful though. He can smell mockery like a bloodhound sniffing a wine stain on parchment."

Dominic nodded, still smiling.

"Then let us make sure the wine stays in our cups and not in our words."

After the meal, still carrying the warmth of shared laughter, Dominic, Bartolomeo, and Raimondo stepped out into the Vatican Gardens. The late afternoon light filtered through the olive trees, casting golden-green shadows onto the gravel path. The gentle breeze stirred the cypress branches. Distant birds sang in languid chorus.

They wandered deeper into the gardens, where few others walked. The hum of Rome lay distant beyond the Leonine walls.

From behind a shadowed hedge, a figure appeared silently as though born from the dusk itself.

Brother Niccolò Spina, the Silent Brother, approached them—his hands folded, eyes glimmering beneath the shadow of his cowl. None were startled. His presence was quiet, yet familiar.

Bartolomeo smiled.
"You do love appearing out of the mists, don't you?"

Niccolò said nothing, but nodded, walking beside them.

They found a secluded bench beneath an old fig tree, its leaves heavy in the warm air.

Dominic sat, the silence pressing on him. Then, without turning his head, he spoke:

"I have to tell you all something. I found a section in the archive—locked behind iron bars. But the gate had been left open. I… I saw things."

Bartolomeo narrowed his eyes.
"What kind of things?"

Dominic's voice dropped to a near whisper.

"The *Grand Grimoire.* A book of summoning demons. Names… rituals… it wasn't folklore, it was detailed. Real. Someone in the Vatican kept it. I also read a file about a missing choirboy… from Trastevere. Suppressed by a Cardinal. And the *Templar Trials*. Their confessions hinted at dangerous knowledge—gnostic beliefs, not heresy. Not devil worship."

The air turned still.

Bartolomeo rubbed his chin, disturbed.
“The *Grand Grimoire*... here, of all places? Why? To study? To keep it hidden? Or to use?”

Raimondo exhaled slowly.

“As for the Templars… I always suspected their trials were a lie. Philip the Fair owed them a fortune. Better to burn them than repay the debt. The Church… the Crown… they both wanted their wealth. ‘Heresy’ was just convenient parchment.”

Dominic leaned forward.
“But what were they really, then?”

Bartolomeo spoke with a glint of conviction:

“They were *gnostics*, brother. On the surface—yes—knights of Christ. But deep down, followers of the hidden knowledge. The Church painted them with devils and horns. But if you read their symbols, their rituals, you’ll find no Satan. You’ll find Sophia. The spark. The imprisoned soul.”

Dominic blinked, as the world tilted slightly around him.

“What *is* Gnosticism, truly?”

Bartolomeo looked over his shoulder, then leaned closer. Niccolò folded his arms, eyes watching.

Bartolomeo's voice became a quiet sermon:

“In the beginning, there was the Fullness—*Pleroma*. From it, the Aeons came. Among them was Sophia, Wisdom. But she made a mistake… a thought outside the harmony. From her error was born the *Demiurge*—the false god, blind and proud. He created this world. Not out of love, but ignorance. That’s why we suffer, why the world is flawed.”

“This world… it’s not heaven. It’s a prison. A labyrinth of flesh. Our souls—divine sparks from the Pleroma—are trapped in these bodies, blinded by illusion. The Church teaches us to praise the creator of the world… but what if that creator is the jailer, not the savior?”

Dominic felt a chill, as though the world had tilted.

“And Christ?” he asked, voice hollow.

Bartolomeo continued, softly:

“Christ was the liberator. The *gnosis*—the knowledge. He came not to die for our sins, but to awaken us. To tell us: the Kingdom is within. But the Church chained his message. Made it into laws, rituals, obedience. But the soul must awaken—each for himself.”

Dominic whispered, almost afraid to speak it:

“Then… what if the Church *is* the mouth of the Demiurge?”

Raimondo closed his eyes, his face pale.
“Then everything we do… all the ink we spill… is shadow cast on walls.”

Niccolò reached into his robe and pulled a folded note. He handed it silently to Dominic.

On it was written, in careful Latin:

“The body is the tomb of the soul.” — Plutarch

Dominic looked up, breath short.
“How long have you all known?”

Bartolomeo glanced at the trees.

“Long enough to be silent. But not long enough to be free.”

A faint rumble sounded above them, and a soft rain began to fall. Gentle drops pattered on leaves and robes. The fig tree shielded them, for now.

Raimondo looked up, letting the rain strike his brow.

“Do you remember Galileo? They said he was sentenced to house arrest. But the notes I saw… speak of other things.”

“He warned of worlds beyond this one,” Bartolomeo added. “That Earth is not the center. Maybe he saw through the veil… maybe they silenced him for what he really knew.”

The four men sat in stillness, as the rain whispered through the garden.

The illusion of heaven trembled like a reflection in disturbed water.

After finishing the conversation in the gardens all the four friends parted ways in silence.

As dusk fell over the domes of the Vatican, the air turned solemn and still. From every corridor and stairwell, a quiet anticipation stirred. Tonight, a Papal Mass would be held in the Cappella Paolina—the Pope’s private chapel nestled deep within the Apostolic Palace. Not open to pilgrims or the masses, this ceremony was reserved for the innermost circle: trusted cardinals, senior clergy, select monks, and papal attendants.

Dominic had been chosen for candle duty—a small task, yet an honor beyond his rank. He was to assist in lighting and arranging candles, preparing incense, and helping the sacristans. Giuliano had given him a nod of approval earlier that day, saying simply:

“Don’t drop anything. And don’t speak unless spoken to. This is no village altar.”

Dominic stood in the sacristy, adjusting the long brass candle holders with careful hands. The air was thick with the scent of frankincense and polished wood. A gold-threaded cloth draped over the altar. Swiss Guards stood tall at the edges of the corridor, unmoving as statues.

The Cappella Paolina, though smaller than the Sistine, was more intimate, its walls alive with sacred breath. Michelangelo's final frescoes, The Conversion of Saul and The Crucifixion of Saint Peter, loomed above in somber magnificence. They watched with hollow eyes and aching glory.

Dominic entered with the others, quietly placing candles in the candelabras flanking the altar. The chapel was already dimly aglow with the soft fire of sacred light.

The Pope himself entered—Urban VIII, head bowed in stately gravity, his gold-trimmed robes swaying with each step. Cardinals rose. The choir began a low chant:

"Tu es Petrus, et super hanc petram ædificabo Ecclesiam meam…"
(*Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church…*)

Dominic stood at the side, near the wall, as the Pope passed only a few feet from him. His heart pounded. Urban VIII was aged now, with a heavy jaw, eyes deep-set and shadowed, yet burning with command. He gave Dominic the briefest glance—then looked away.

The Mass unfolded with elegant gravity. Each moment was rehearsed, every genuflection precise. Latin psalms filled the air, echoing under the painted ceiling.

The Pope turned to bless the Eucharist, his voice steady and resonant:

"Hoc est enim Corpus Meum."
(*For this is My Body.*)

Dominic knelt as the sacramental bread was consecrated. A moment later, he was summoned forward among the others. The golden plate passed, and suddenly, he was face to face with the Pope.

Urban VIII placed the **host** upon Dominic's tongue. For the briefest second, their eyes met.

"Go in peace, my son," the Pope said, his voice deep as old stone.

Dominic bowed and whispered:

"Amen."

He stepped back, trembling slightly—not from fear, but the sheer weight of presence, of ritual, of long tradition stretching centuries behind that single moment.

As the Mass concluded, the choir began the hymn:

"Ave verum corpus, natum de Maria Virgine…"
(*Hail, true body, born of the Virgin Mary…*)

The sound seemed to rise like smoke toward the painted heavens.

After the dismissal, Dominic helped extinguish candles with the other attendants. Wax dripped onto his fingers, warm and fragrant. He felt distant—as though floating.

Outside the chapel, as the other monks returned to their quarters, Dominic lingered a moment longer in the corridor. He looked back once more at the door of the Cappella Paolina, its golden handle glinting in the torchlight.

That door closed not only upon a chapel—but upon secrets far deeper than incense or liturgy.

And he had stepped into their shadow.

After the solemnity of the Mass the night before, Dominic returned to his chamber, feeling as though a veil of holiness still hung over him. He knelt before the small wooden crucifix on the wall and prayed in a whisper:

"Lord, grant me the strength to walk through the shadows in search of Your truth. Guard my mind from pride and error, and my soul from temptation. Let me carry Your light, even into places dimly lit."

He then washed his hands and face with cool water from the basin and collapsed into bed, sleep taking him fast.

At dawn, Dominic awoke, dressed in silence, and walked to the dining hall. Cold rye porridge again. He sighed, muttered a humble thanks to God, and spooned it down. The monks chewed without expression, and the stone walls echoed the clink of wooden bowls and spoons like dull thunder.

Later, in the scriptorium, Giuliano greeted him with a scroll in hand.

"A letter to be delivered," Giuliano said without looking up. "Rewritten for clarity and precision. To be brought personally to *Cupulus Orsini*, a merchant noble of the House of Orsini. You'll find him in the noble quarter, near Piazza Margana. And try not to get lost."

"It would be a welcomed change from ink and candle wax," Dominic replied, bowing slightly as he accepted the letter.

"Indeed," Giuliano grunted. "But do keep your robes clean. That man sweats money and smells like figs."

At the Leonine Gate, Dominic checked his name with Brother Ugo Contarini, who sat lazily behind a rickety desk, the gate log opened on his lap. A pair of dice rolled idly in his palm.

"Off to hand kisses from His Holiness, are we?" Ugo chuckled.

"A letter," Dominic said. "To Orsini."

"Same thing," Ugo muttered, scribbling Dominic's name into the register with an inky flourish. Behind a crate sat a mug of dark ale, already half-drained.

"If you pass the market, fetch me some bread, brother," Ugo added. "I've eaten nothing but dreams since yesterday."

"Only if I win at dice," Dominic said dryly, stepping into the sunlight.

Rome opened up like a living fresco. Dominic took his time, letting his eyes wander over the worn facades and ancient arches, where time seemed to rest on every stone.

He passed an elderly woman, hunched and trembling, leaning heavily on a stick as if the weight of the world had gathered in her bones. She moved like a slow wind through the alley. A barefoot child, laughing, chasing a wooden wheel down a dusty path, his joy unchained by the poverty in his clothes. A dog barking and growling as it chased a mangy cat beneath a cart, the cat spitting like a devil as it vanished into a barrel. A fat grain seller, puffing and red-faced, dragging sacks of wheat from a mule cart to his stall, muttering curses in between attempts to whistle a tune. A mother with her sleeves rolled up, yelling from her door to two children:

"You were told—*in front of the house*! Not the *whole damn city*! If I have to find you again, I'll bind you to the table like sacramental bread!"

A man on a balcony, whistling quietly as he watered potted herbs, their scent mixing with sun and stone—basil, rosemary, and thyme. A beggar, cloaked in rags, one eye blind and clouded, sitting with a bowl. Dominic stopped and placed a coin gently into it.

"In God's name," Dominic said softly.

The man looked up, and tears formed immediately in his sun-wrinkled eyes. He tried to speak, but only mouthed silent thanks. Dominic laid a hand briefly on the man's shoulder before moving on.

Finally, at the edge of the noble quarter, two armored guards flanked the stone stair leading into the House of Orsini. Dominic approached, robes dusty but composed.

"Dominic of the Vatican. I bring a letter from Father Giuliano, Chief Archivist."

The guards exchanged glances, then nodded. One knocked, and the wooden doors creaked open.

Inside, the air was cool and smelled of lavender oil. Tapestries depicting saints and battles hung from the walls.

A fat man with oily skin and combed black hair, dressed in burgundy silks, waddled down the hall, beaming with curiosity.

"Ah! A brother from the Vatican! I am *Cupulus Orsini*. I seldom get visits from those who wear robes rather than armor or perfume."

Dominic bowed and held out the sealed letter.

"A letter, sir, rewritten under the Chief Archivist's supervision."

Cupulus cracked the seal and glanced through the contents briefly before smiling.

“The handwriting is like a monk’s prayer—precise, unreadable, and sacred,” he chuckled. “Do monks always look so pale, or do the Vatican walls simply keep the sun out?”

“We live in quiet work and prayer, signore. Candlelight more than sunlight.”

“Ha! What a world. I suppose you write while the rest of us sin.”

Cupulus moved to a tray and offered a small plate of figs, candied nuts, and slices of sugared orange peel.

“Come now, you walked all this way. You’ll have a little sweet.”

Dominic accepted with thanks and took a piece of candied fig, chewing quietly.

“Tell me, monk, do you ever long to be free of your duties? Or is there joy in such quiet?”

Dominic replied carefully:

“There is a kind of peace in simplicity. And joy in discovering what lies beyond the surface of things.”

Cupulus nodded, intrigued but not pressing further.

“You monks. You always say something that sounds holy, but feels like a riddle. I like that. My grandfather was a monk, you know—left the cloth for a woman and a vineyard. Said it was God’s will. I say it was just good sense.”

They laughed lightly, and after a little more polite conversation, Dominic bowed and excused himself.

“Send Father Giuliano my regards,” Cupulus said, walking him to the door. “And tell him he still owes me that copy of *De Re Militari*.”

As Dominic stepped into the street again, sunlight shimmered on the tiles, and the city of Rome breathed its endless song.

He walked back toward the Vatican, the taste of figs still sweet on his tongue, and the letter delivered—though what it truly contained, he would never know.

As Dominic made his way back through the narrow streets of Rome, he passed a street vendor, hunched beneath a faded awning, his hands dusted in flour, laying warm loaves of fresh bread onto a wooden board. The scent of yeast and crust pulled Dominic like a whisper from heaven.

“One round loaf, signore,” Dominic said.

The vendor handed him a steaming wheat loaf, and Dominic handed over a few coins. Then, he saw a small rye bun—dark, dense, and still warm.

“And that one,” Dominic added, grabbing the bun.

He bit into it immediately, the crust cracking, the earthy flavor of rye and caraway filling his mouth. He ate it in three bites and wiped his hands on his robe, content.

Half an hour later, Dominic arrived once more at the Leonine Gate. Brother Ugo Contarini was leaned back in his chair, cards and dice strewn across the desk. He looked up and sniffed the air.

“Is that bread I smell or a miracle?”

Dominic held up the loaf and placed it before him.

“Your miracle, brother.”

Ugo gave a delighted grunt and tossed Dominic a few coins.

“Blessed are you among monks,” he said, immediately biting into the bread like a wolf into a haunch. “Praise the Lord—and the flour!”

He washed the bite down with a gulp of ale and waved Dominic off with a grateful mouthful.

Back inside the Vatican, Dominic returned to the scriptorium, where Giuliano sat hunched over his desk, squinting at a crumpled parchment.

“The Orsini letter is delivered,” Dominic reported.

“Good. Now for something less exciting and more eternal—tax scrolls,” Giuliano said, handing Dominic a stack with yellowed edges. “From the Diocese of Rimini. Copy them neatly. Every coin must be accounted for—even the imaginary ones.”

Dominic took his seat with a nod, dipped his quill in ink, and began his slow, rhythmic scribing:

“Inventory of grain collected for the Bishopric. 72 bushels stored in the cellar. 12 sold to merchants of Ancona. 3 spoiled by rats and rot. Remaining: 57. Coins owed: 184.”

The work numbed his fingers but gave his mind room to wander.

That evening, with the sun slowly curling into the horizon, Dominic walked the Vatican gardens under a sky painted gold and peach. The sweet perfume of lavender and basil filled the air.

By a fountain of worn marble, Brother Bartolomeo Danti sat cross-legged beneath an olive tree, his eyes closed in stillness. As Dominic approached, Bartolomeo opened his eyes with a slow smile.

“You move like one who carries weight,” Bartolomeo said.

“I scribed twenty pages of Rimini tax records,” Dominic sighed. “My soul nearly fled my body.”

Bartolomeo chuckled and patted the grass beside him. Dominic sat.

“You once told me,” Dominic said, “that you don’t pray much. But that you… meditate. What does that mean?”

Bartolomeo looked up at the leaves, sunlight flickering through like divine lace.

“Meditation is not prayer,” he said slowly. “Not in the way we were taught. It is not pleading, nor praising, nor repeating psalms. It is simply… listening.”

“Listening to what?” Dominic asked, brow furrowed.

“To what is within. The silence. The breath. The still voice of the divine. Christ said *‘the Kingdom of God is within you.’* I believe that. So I go there, every day. I close my eyes, sit still, and go within.”

“But how do you do it? I mean, exactly?” Dominic asked, curious.

“You sit,” Bartolomeo said. “Close your eyes. Let the noise settle. You focus on your breath, or a word—a holy word. You let your thoughts pass like clouds. You do not wrestle them, only watch them. In time, you find yourself deeper than thought, beneath the chatter. There is peace there, Dominic. And truth.”

Dominic sat quietly for a moment, letting that image settle in his mind.

“Should I… try?” he asked.

“Every day, if you can,” Bartolomeo said. “Just for ten minutes at first. Before sunrise. After Vespers. It doesn’t matter. Go within, and you’ll find what no scriptorium can give you.”

“And that is?”

“The door.”

“To where?”

Bartolomeo smiled softly.

“To the Kingdom.”

Dominic gazed up at the early stars, his thoughts stirring with quiet anticipation. Perhaps tonight, in the solitude of his chamber, he would try.

Not to speak. But to listen.

A year passed, like a whispered psalm in the nave of time. Dominic’s life had settled into its quiet rhythm: hours at the scriptorium, bent over scrolls and manuscripts; occasional walks through the Vatican gardens, candle duty at Vespers, soft conversations with Bartolomeo, Raimondo, and Sister Caterina — when their duties allowed.

But Dominic's soul had shifted. Something had awakened. And though his hands copied tax records and letters from bishops, his mind longed for deeper truths.

It was in the dust-heavy corners of the Secret Archive, behind half-toppled shelves and forgotten crates, that Dominic continued his silent pilgrimage into the forbidden.

One autumn afternoon, candle in hand, he pulled down a thick binding clad in cracked leather, nearly black with age. The gilded spine read:

"Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm" – The Picatrix

Translated into Latin centuries ago, the pages smelled of sandalwood and mildew. A warning was scrawled across the inner cover in a trembling hand:

"Periculosum est videre. Melius est nescire."
(It is dangerous to see. Better not to know.)

Dominic turned the pages carefully and read:

"Know that the stars are not gods, but mirrors. And if thou alignest thy will with the heavenly houses, thou mayest command the flow of nature and time."

"Construct thou a talisman at the hour of Jupiter, under the sign of the Lion, if it be thy desire to gain wisdom and noble favor. But beware—without purity of heart, such power is poison."

A chart of planetary sigils followed, drawn in gold ink now faded to ochre.

Next, Dominic found a green-bound volume titled:

Corpus Hermeticum – Writings of Hermes Trismegistus

He had heard whispers of the name from Bartolomeo. Now he read with reverence:

"As above, so below. That which is within is like that which is without."

"The mind is the builder, the word is the tool, and the spirit the craftsman. All men carry divine reason within them—but few awaken it."

"God is not a tyrant in the clouds but a breath within every motion. To know thyself is to know the All."

Dominic paused. That phrase again: *"Know thyself."* He traced the words with his fingertip as if trying to feel their weight.

Another scroll lay tucked behind a statue fragment. On the ribbon binding it, he read:

The Chaldean Oracles – Verses of Fire

The language was poetic, cryptic:

"Do not stir the soul with mortal clay. Ascend, fire-born, and cleave the vaults of heaven."

“The Father hath implanted in souls a fire, a spark from the stars. But the body is a tomb—break its silence and you shall hear the hymn of the spheres.”

“Let no one uninitiated approach. For the gods do not suffer mockery.”

Dominic’s hand trembled. He felt something like ecstasy, like sorrow. The words rang like bells in the chambers of his mind.

Lastly, by the foot of an iron-bound chest, he found a small, battered grimoire, wrapped in waxed linen. Inside, the ink was still sharp. Across the first page, in ornate Gothic script:

Clavicula Salomonis – The Key of Solomon

He flipped through pages of circles, sigils, instructions for purification, invocations:

“Before calling upon the spirits, thou must wash thy body thrice in spring water and abstain from flesh and wine for three days.”

“To summon the Angel Anael under the Moon, light candles of white beeswax and draw the circle of Venus.”

“To bind a demon, inscribe the names of God: ADONAY, ELOHIM, SHADDAI, and cast the circle with iron.”

One passage caught his breath:

“Let the conjurer be warned: what is summoned may not be easily dismissed. The spirits resent imprisonment. Only the righteous shall command them safely.”

Dominic slowly closed the book, sweat on his brow despite the cold stone.

He spent hours there, buried beneath layers of time, secrecy, seated cross-legged between scrolls and lost wisdom, while the candle burned low and flickered shadows on the marble walls.

When the bells finally tolled Compline, the hour of rest, Dominic returned to his chamber. His legs ached, but his spirit felt full, overflowing with mystery.

That night, like so many now, Dominic meditated before sleep. He sat by the small wooden crucifix on his desk, candle flickering beside it, and closed his eyes.

He breathed deeply.

He let the words fall away. Let the thoughts pass.

He sought the inner kingdom Bartolomeo had spoken of—not in fear, not in desire, but in stillness.

And in that stillness… he felt something.

A spark. A whisper. A silence that was not empty, but full.

One night Dominic went to the Grottoes again. The grottoes breathed with silence.

Brother Carlo Manetti's lantern cast long, flickering shadows across the ancient sarcophagi. The air hung heavy with the scent of old stone and lingering incense. Dominic stepped softly between the tombs, the candlelight catching the edges of carved Latin inscriptions.

"Peace be upon these bones, Brother Carlo," Dominic said quietly.

"And upon the living who walk among them," Carlo replied, glancing sideways. "Good evening, Brother Dominic."

They came to a simple marble tomb, its face engraved with: INNOCENTIVS PAPA IX.

"Giovanni Antonio Facchinetti," Dominic murmured, reading the inscription. "He ruled for two months, if I recall."

Carlo nodded. "Yes. Died in 1591. His reign flickered like a candle in the wind. They buried him first in a provisional tomb, tucked here between the old and new basilica."

Dominic placed his hand on the cool marble. Dust had settled in the grooves of the carved name.

"It's strange," he said. "Even popes become dust, don't they?"

"The mitre does not shield the skull," Carlo said grimly. "All bones crack the same in time."

Carlo turned and gestured with the lantern, the golden light dancing ahead of them as they moved deeper into the crypt. The hush of eternity surrounded them. Soon, they arrived at a niche beside the tomb of Paul VI, where another sarcophagus rested, worn but noble.

"Here lies Marcellus II of Montepulciano," Carlo said. "Pope for twenty-two days. Died in 1555."

"I've heard of him," Dominic replied. "A man of great virtue. They say he didn't even want to be pope."

"He didn't," Carlo confirmed. "His humility clung to him even in death. This sarcophagus wasn't even meant for him—it once held the remains of a Christian couple."

He pointed with the lantern toward the sculpted corners of the sarcophagus. "See the figures? They say those are Peter and Paul."

Dominic leaned in to look more closely. The candlelight revealed faint details of the carved figures standing beside a central image of Christ.

"On the front," Carlo continued, "the Savior stands on a rock, scroll of the new law in hand. Beneath him, the four mystic rivers flow—symbols of the Gospels."

"The rivers of Eden," Dominic said softly. "Transformed into the rivers of the Word."

“His first tomb was plain,” Carlo said. “Just a coffin with a convex lid. But when they reopened it in 1606—more than fifty years after his death—they found his body intact.”

Dominic blinked. “Intact?”

“As if he had only just passed,” Carlo said. “His great-nephews took it as a sign. They moved him here and added the embellishments. The coat-of-arms you see—that was the work of Cardinal Bellarmine, his nephew.”

“Even the humble may be adorned, in the end,” Dominic said.

“Or rewritten,” Carlo replied. “Death does not erase the ambitions of the living.”

Dominic stood in silence, staring at the sarcophagus. His thoughts were heavy and reverent. After a long pause, he asked, “Brother Carlo… you walk these tombs every night. Do you ever fear they’ll open again?”

Carlo gave a faint smile, one that held a trace of cold knowledge. “They already do, Dominic. In dreams. In whispers. The stones remember. And sometimes, they speak.”

A chill crept along Dominic’s spine—not entirely from the subterranean air. He bowed his head.

“May they find peace,” he whispered. “May we find understanding.”

Carlo raised the lantern slightly, its flame shivering. “Come,” he said. “There are more bones yet to sleep beside.”

But Dominic lingered, his gaze fixed on the Savior in marble—eternal, unmoved, scroll in hand. The rock beneath His feet, the rivers flowing out from it, echoed like a vision in Dominic’s mind.

Behind him, Brother Carlo’s steps faded into the shadows.

The walls of the grottoes closed around them like the ribs of a giant beast, cold and ancient. Each step echoed with centuries of memory. Carlo’s lantern swayed in his hand, casting wavering arcs of light across the marbled dead. They walked in silence for a while, until Carlo stopped in front of a large tomb nestled into the second niche on the right.

“This,” Carlo said quietly, raising the lantern, “is the resting place of Pope Nicholas V. Tommaso Parentucelli of Sarzana.”

Dominic stepped forward. The sarcophagus, dignified but not extravagant, bore the long Latin inscription etched across its face. Above it, the figure of Nicholas V lay in repose atop a draped catafalque, hands clasped in eternal prayer, the folds of his papal vestments carved in stiff, solemn lines. The pontifical crossed keys were etched upon the frieze of his chasuble.

“Once,” Carlo added, “he lay beneath the nave of the old basilica. Then moved again. And again. The church loves to rearrange its bones.”

Dominic leaned in to read the inscription, his fingers gently brushing the cold stone as he whispered the Latin aloud, translating softly:

"Deposited here are the bones of Pope Nicholas V, who gave you, Rome, the golden era.
Illustrious in culture, more illustrious in every virtue, respected learned men as he himself was learned.
Put an end to the error of schism that had attacked the world, restored customs, walls, churches, houses.
As he celebrated the sacred time of the Jubilee, he canonized Bernardino from Siena.
He put the gold crown on the head of Frederic and his wife, recomposed Italy by forming alliances.
He had many works of the Greek authors translated in Latin.
Say a prayer in front of his sacred tomb."

Dominic stepped back, his gaze drifting over the rigid cherubs holding the inscription, their marble eyes frozen in time.

“He brought light to Rome,” Dominic said. “And yet he sleeps here in the dark.”

Carlo gave a small nod. “All light becomes shadow, Brother. Even golden eras are buried.”

Dominic remained quiet. The silence of the place was vast, a deep well of memory and unspoken things. Carlo lowered his lantern slowly and knelt before the tomb.

Then, with an almost reverent gesture, he blew out the flame.

Darkness swallowed them.

“I must rest now,” Carlo said. “The dead are quieter than the living, but no less tiring.”

His voice was soft, barely audible in the dark.

“Peace be upon your steps,” Dominic whispered.

Without another word, Carlo vanished into the corridor, his soft steps fading into the ancient hush.

Dominic stood alone, facing the tomb of Nicholas V. The scent of cold stone filled his lungs. He felt the press of centuries in the darkness, the slow beat of the basilica’s heart beneath his feet. One pope had given Rome its golden era. Another—Urban VIII—had perhaps doomed it to fire and smoke.

"Say a prayer in front of his sacred tomb," the inscription had urged.

Dominic did. His voice a whisper.

Revelation

And then, in the gloom of the grottoes, surrounded by the silence of popes and prophets, heretics and saints, he stood still—thinking not only of the past, but of what might yet come.

Dominic moved slowly, almost reverently, through the silent grottoes, the chill of marble walls whispering through his robes. His thoughts circled the names he had read, the secrets buried behind stone. Then, at the edge of a little-used corridor —hidden behind a leaning pillar and a patch of shadow: a crack in the wall.

He paused. His eyes narrowed. Not a crack, but a narrow crevice, carved by neither accident nor time.

He stepped closer, brushing his fingers along the uneven stone. Cold air pressed against his face, and his breath drew short. The draft was real. This wasn't a dead end. It led somewhere. Somewhere forgotten.

He turned back quickly and fetched Brother Carlo's lantern, still warm from the gravekeeper's grip. Lighting the wick with shaking fingers, Dominic returned to the crevice. He stood for a moment at its mouth, heart hammering against his ribs like a trapped bird.

He whispered to himself, "Should I?"

A voice within answered with silence.

And so, without another thought, Dominic pressed his shoulder into the opening, twisting his body sideways through the jagged stone until he stumbled out onto a small stone platform.

Stone steps stretched downward into blackness, like a throat swallowing light.

Lantern held high, he began to descend.

Each step felt older than the last. Dust coated the stones, undisturbed, untouched. The air was heavy and cold, thick with ancient sleep.

What is this place? he thought. No one has been down here in centuries…

At the base of the stairs, a low corridor opened before him, branching into small chambers carved into the living rock. The air smelled of limestone and time.

He stepped into the first room and held up the lantern.

A plaque read: *Mausoleum of Lucius Tullius Zethus.*

Dominic's eyes caught the eight marble squares on the floor—each with a circular hole. He recognized the ritual. Offerings for the dead. Libations poured to honor the departed during funerary rites.

He shivered.

“This is pre-Christian,” he whispered. “Older than the saints… older than the catacombs.”

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He backed out carefully and moved to the next room. Inside, light flickered across the smooth surface of a tall vase, decorated in faded paint. He brought the lantern closer and gasped.

Medusa stared back at him, fanged and crowned with snakes.

Medusa… the Gorgon. Not a symbol of the Church, but of the old world.

His thoughts spun: *There’s a sarcophagus in the grottoes carved with her image as well…*

He stared at the vase, then whispered to himself, “This should not be here. They’ve preserved it. Kept it. Why? Why beneath the house of God?”

He turned, unease rising in his gut. His feet moved onward, deeper, as though pulled by a string of fate.

The third chamber bore an inscription etched above the archway: *Valeri Family.*

He stepped inside and froze.

False idols. Dozens of them. Statues in various states of decay – heads -watching with sightless eyes. In the same room two Geniuses with bat wings portrayed on the walls.

And on the other wall… a figure, horned and laying down, gripping a pickaxe.

Dominic recoiled.

What is that? he thought. A god of the dead? Or something darker?

He whispered aloud, “This is pagan. This is not holy. Why is it still here? Why has the Church not destroyed this? They burn witches and litarature, yet keep these down here.”

He stepped closer, voice shaking.

“Valeri… Valeri… Marcus Valerius… no, Lucius… Wait. The Valeri were a patrician family. Ancient Rome. Maybe from Marcus Aurelius’ time.”

The thought chilled him.

If this is that old… how deep have I gone?

He suddenly felt the weight of the world above him—tons of basilica, bones, marble, popes, and saints pressing down. The walls closed in. The darkness thickened. The flame of the lantern sputtered with a hiss.

He thought of turning back. For a moment, he almost did.

But then… he stepped forward.

Something told him: there was more.

He walked softly now, eyes darting to the shadows. A draft breathed down the corridor. The dead murmured, or perhaps it was only stone.

His heart beat loud in his ears. One foot forward. Then another. Always deeper.

He whispered a prayer, barely audible.

“Domine, dirige me… Lord, guide me.”

Dominic pressed onward, the flicker of the lantern shivering against damp stone. His feet echoed softly, his breath shallow in the still air. Each step forward was another step into something that should not be—something the Church above had long forgotten, or perhaps hidden on purpose.

He entered the next room.

A mosaic floor stretched beneath his feet, still intact despite the centuries. His eyes widened as the patterns came into focus in the lantern light. Mercury, the messenger of the gods, was striding forward with winged ankles, his caduceus in hand—serpents coiling around the rod like double helixes of fate.

Behind him rode Pluto and Persephone in a grand chariot of obsidian stone and golden wheels. Their faces were serene, but their eyes—those eyes—seemed to follow Dominic as he moved. The scene was clear: a journey through the underworld.

Dominic stood frozen. “This is… this is an explicit reference to the afterlife,” he whispered.

The overcoming of death. But not through Christ. Through Pluto.

He shook his head slowly.

“All these gods—Mercury, Pluto—underneath the House of Peter. What does this mean?”

The lantern shook in his hand as he walked on, sweat gathering on his brow despite the chill of the air.

He entered another chamber, and the moment he lifted the lantern, his breath caught.

Jesus Christ.

Or… at least the name might apply.

But not the Christ he knew.

Here, Jesus was depicted as the Sun God. A radiant figure crowned with solar rays, his hands outstretched as beams poured from his head. Around him circled the zodiac signs, like apostles of the cosmos.

His robes gleamed like fire. A golden orb was clutched in his hand. Dominic's knees weakened.

He thought: "Sol Invictus… the Unconquered Sun. Why is the Lord of Heaven shown like this? The pagan sun god?"

His voice trembled aloud: “Was this… how they once saw Him?”

He stepped back, heart pounding.

His thoughts screamed: *They've merged the old gods and the new. The Vatican rests on temples. Maybe Peter was buried in Rome's bones for a reason.*

He turned to go… but something compelled him. One last room. One final darkness.

He stepped inside.

The lantern’s light fell across the wall and Dominic’s breath stopped entirely.

A figure stood there… arms spread, clothed in celestial light. But its eyes—terrible, beautiful, sorrowful—were unlike any saint. This was Lucifer.

The Light Bearer.

Above him was engraved in Latin: *Lucifer, Filius Aurorae – Lucifer, Son of the Dawn.*

Dominic’s voice cracked. “Isaiah…”

His mind filled with verses he had read over and over:

“How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!” – Isaiah 14:12

“You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations.”

And opposite the Light Bearer… another figure.

Vesper.

The evening star.

A simple carving—a lone star descending behind mountains. A quiet counterpoint to Lucifer's brilliant flame. The twin symbols. Birth and death. Morning and evening. Light rising and fading.

He dropped to his knees.

"The great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world…" – Revelation 12:9

His hands trembled violently. The lantern nearly slipped from his grip.

"What is this place?" he whispered, tears stinging his eyes. "What is buried beneath the Church of God?"

He backed out of the room, stumbling.

Walls spun. Air thinned. His chest heaved. Panic clawed at his throat.

He turned and fled.

The lantern's flame guttered as he sprinted up the stairs, barely avoiding a fall. He scraped his side squeezing back through the crevice, emerging into the grotto like a soul reborn from the tomb.

He gasped for breath.

His robe clung to him, drenched in sweat. The sacred ground above felt… desecrated now. Or perhaps, revealed.

He ran, his sandals slapping the stone floor, back to the safety of his chamber. He slammed the door behind him and dropped to his knees, the lantern extinguished, the dark comforting now compared to what he had seen.

He wept.

And then he prayed.

"Deliver me, O Lord, from the lies of men. Show me Thy truth, for I know not where it lies. Hide me beneath Thy wings, for the stars deceive, and even light burns with false fire…"

He pressed his forehead to the cold floor. His lips trembled.

But still, behind closed eyes, he saw it all again:

The Sun God. The Light Bearer. The Medusa. The gods beneath the Rock.

The Gods in the Depths

Dominic had not slept. Not truly. The few moments he drifted into dreams had been worse than the waking hours. Twisted visions plagued him: blackened stone heads laughing in chorus; a horned figure with a pickaxe crawling out of the Valeri tomb, dragging his tool behind like a dead weight; the evening star Vesper glowing red over Rome; a hand made of bones reaching for him from beneath the mosaic floor.

He woke soaked in sweat, breath shallow, hands trembling. Morning brought no clarity—only more questions.

He prayed with a dry tongue. "Lord, if what I saw is darkness, show me the light. If it is light, show me how to bear it."

At breakfast, he barely tasted the bread. At the scriptorium, his hand shook as he copied lines from an old homily. But his mind was elsewhere: in stone tombs, with forgotten gods.

Evening came.

As the sun dipped behind the dome of St. Peter's, Dominic stepped into the Vatican Gardens and found Brother Raimondo Corsi and Brother Bartolomeo Danti beneath a cluster of cypress trees, where the shade fell soft and solemn. The Silent Brother, Fra Niccolò Spina, stood near the ivy-covered wall, as still as stone.

Dominic approached. "I need to speak," he said quietly. "I've seen something beneath the grottoes."

Raimondo looked up, raising an eyebrow. Bartolomeo narrowed his eyes. Fra Niccolò said nothing, only tilted his head.

Dominic sat on the low stone bench beside them and began.

He spoke of the crack in the wall, the lantern, the stairs, the Necropolis. He described the mausoleums—Lucius Tullius Zethus, the Valeri family, the vase with Medusa, the image of Christ as Sol Invictus, the mosaics of Mercury and Pluto, and the final room: Lucifer, the Morning Star, and Vesper, the Evening Star.

When he finished, Raimondo made the sign of the cross slowly. "*Sancta Maria, ora pro nobis…*"

Bartolomeo stared, his lips slightly parted. "This cannot be…" he whispered. "That place is not on any map."

Fra Niccolò finally moved. He turned his face toward Dominic and gave a slow, knowing nod —*but remained silent.*

Dominic looked to them all. "Tell me I'm mad. Please. Tell me this is all… metaphor. That it means nothing."

Raimondo shook his head. “No, brother. You saw what you saw. And I believe you. But what it means…” he trailed off.

Bartolomeo finally spoke. “The Vatican was built atop pagan ground. We know this. But to preserve these tombs? To hide gods beneath the Rock of Peter?” He looked toward Niccolò. “If this is known to the highest ranks of the Church—why?”

Dominic leaned forward. “Do they worship these gods still? Is there a reason the depictions remain? Why would Christ be shown as a sun god?”

Raimondo frowned. “Perhaps it is symbolic—Christ as the true light, the new sun. That might be what they would tell us…”

Bartolomeo cut in, voice sharper. “No. The Medusa, the horned demon, Pluto, and Persephone—that’s not symbolic. That’s intentional preservation. These are not leftovers. These are reminders.”

Fra Niccolò finally raised a hand and made a simple gesture—two fingers pointing upward, then slowly circling downward.

Dominic looked down at his hands. “And Lucifer? Vesper?”

Raimondo looked nervously around. “We must be cautious speaking these things.”

Fra Niccolò reached into his robe and pulled out a small pouch of white stones, dropping them one by one into his hand—six in total. He looked Dominic in the eyes and then tossed the sixth aside into the grass.

Dominic’s voice was a whisper. “What does that mean?”

Bartolomeo interpreted, grimly. “*You’ve stepped beyond the sixth veil. What comes next… is the seventh. The hidden one.*”

The garden around them fell into silence. The last light of the sun dipped below the rooftops. And in the soft rustle of the leaves, Dominic thought he heard a voice from deep below, echoing in memory:

“Lucifer, Son of the Morning...”

He looked up at the darkening sky. One star blinked into view.

Weeks passed. Quiet weeks. Days folded into each other like parchment over parchment.

Dominic rose early each morning. Washed. Prayed. Ate the same lukewarm porridge. Spent long hours in the scriptorium, copying tax records, transcribing sermons, repairing brittle pages, inking faded words back into the world.

On some evenings, he visited the library, and sometimes even the Secret Archive, moving through shadows, his mind still haunted by the chambers beneath the Vatican—the ancient tombs, the false idols, the light-bearing serpent.

He said nothing to most. Only to his brothers in quiet places. Otherwise, he walked in silence, spoke in obedience, and scribed in routine.

One night, the stars veiled in clouds, the air heavy and still, Dominic descended into the Grottoes again, lantern in hand.

There, beneath the hallowed stones, Sister Caterina Farnese knelt before a marble slab, a flickering candle by her side, her face bowed in prayer.

Dominic approached quietly.

“I did not expect to see you,” he said gently.

Caterina turned her head slowly, the candlelight catching in her eyes.

“I come here often now,” she whispered. “More than I used to.”

Dominic hesitated, then stepped closer. His heart beat heavier around her lately, as if something soft and fragile had grown within him. A feeling he could neither name nor remove.

“I find peace here,” he said, though it was only half true.

Caterina rose to her feet, smoothing her robes, and walked slowly beside him, their steps echoing faintly in the stone vaults.

“I’ve been praying more,” she said. “Sometimes all night. But still the dreams come. Still the shadows come.”

“Dreams?” Dominic asked. “What kind?”

She did not meet his gaze. “Demons,” she said. “Chasing me. Laughing with hollow mouths. And sometimes… I’m not sure they’re dreams at all.”

Dominic was silent for a long moment. Then he said carefully, “There are things in this place, Caterina. Things that should not be here.”

She looked up sharply. “What do you mean?”

He hesitated. He couldn’t speak of the Necropolis, not yet. It wasn’t time.

“Just… trust me. Some things here are not what they seem. And maybe your soul—sensitive as it is—feels something. Maybe that’s where the dreams come from.”

Caterina stared at him, her lips slightly parted. She took a step away, as if drawn back into herself.

“There are dark things here,” she said. “You’re right. Things I cannot speak of. Things that… happened to me.”

Dominic’s brow furrowed. “What do you mean? Did someone hurt you?”

Her eyes filled with tears, silently at first. Then her breath caught, and she turned sharply, hands covering her face.

“I cannot speak it—please don’t ask—” she cried, her voice cracking.

“Caterina…” Dominic reached out instinctively, but she had already turned.

She rushed away, her footsteps soft and frantic, the hem of her habit trailing like smoke in the shadows.

Dominic stood alone. The cold air of the Grottoes pinched his cheeks, stung his fingers. Around him, the tombs were silent, but the stones seemed heavier than ever before—like they knew more than they were willing to share.

He pressed his hand to the wall where her candle still flickered, and murmured, “Lord… protect her. She is good. Too good for this place.”

And in the silence that followed, he began to understand something deeper: she, too, was one of them. One of the few who could see through the veil.

A week passed, it was nearly dusk in the Vatican Gardens, and the cypress trees cast long shadows across the gravel paths. The air was thick with the scent of rosemary and myrtle, the silence broken only by the distant ringing of a bell from the north tower.

Dominic sat on a moss-stained bench near the statue of Saint Paul. Beside him, Brother Raimondo Corsi leaned on his cane, whispering as he watched a pair of cardinals stroll far off, oblivious.

Brother Bartolomeo Danti arrived with quiet steps, his worn sandals scuffing the earth, and last came Fra Niccolò Spina, the Silent Brother, gliding like a shadow.

They exchanged no greeting, only nods. The time for formality had long passed. They were now bound by darker ties.

Dominic was the first to speak, his voice a breath:

“Have you heard… more rumors about the Pope?”

Bartolomeo leaned in. “Too many. And none of them comforting.”

Raimondo snorted softly. “Urbanus delays all council decisions until his court astrologers say the stars are favorable. *Mars in retrograde? He cancels meetings.*”

Dominic frowned. “Astrology guiding papal policy. And they call us heretics.”

“Worse than that,” Bartolomeo added, lowering his voice. “It’s said Urban relies on a private prophecy… that Rome will fall. That the papacy itself will collapse in fire.”

Niccolò shifted slightly, his eyes narrowing.

Dominic whispered, “Like the *Barberini Prophecy*. I found it in the archive. Smoke and ruin.”

Raimondo leaned closer, looking side to side before speaking. “The Inquisition’s reach has grown longer. In Umbria last month, a widow was condemned for owning a jar of herbs and an unreadable book. No trial. No mercy. Just ashes.”

“They say hundreds have vanished across Lazio,” Bartolomeo murmured. “Some weren’t even witches or heretics. Just inconvenient.”

“Executed to please the stars,” Raimondo said bitterly. “Or to deflect the public from Urban’s taxes. The people are hungry.”

Dominic nodded. “He’s squeezing Rome dry. The market stalls in Trastevere—half of them are shuttered. My mother told me bread costs three times what it did last year.”

“And all the while,” Bartolomeo added, “the Pope orders ancient statues destroyed. Gods of stone—Jupiter, Diana, Venus—all carted off as ‘pagan abominations’.”

Raimondo smirked. “Yet they’re not broken. They’re stored. In vaults beneath us. *We know. You’ve seen them, Dominic.*”

Dominic exhaled through his nose. “They keep what they call cursed. As if they know it holds power.”

Fra Niccolò, silent until now, finally spoke in his soft gravel voice:
“Because they do know....”

The others fell quiet.

Cicadas buzzed high in the trees. A breeze rustled the rosemary.

Fra Niccolò only stared upward, toward the cupola of St. Peter’s, its dome beginning to glow red in the dying sun.

Dominic’s hands clenched at his sides. “What are we to do?”

Bartolomeo whispered, “We keep the Gnosis alive. We endure. We pass the Light in silence.”

“Until the time is right,” Raimondo added, “to bring it back into the world.”

Fra Niccolò nodded once, solemn.

The four of them sat in silence as twilight fell, and shadows grew long like fingers stretching across the earth.

And above them, the dome watched like an unblinking eye.

Months passed in silent routine: breakfast, scribing, archive visits, prayer. Each day tested the edges of Dominic’s resolve and the weight of what he had seen.

One evening, drawn by something deeper than curiosity or dread, Dominic returned to the Grottoes. Brother Carlo Manetti had already completed his nightly rounds and extinguished his lamp. The grottoes were still. Empty.

Dominic felt the familiar ache in his legs as he retrieved Carlo's lamp, lighting its flickering candle. The vaults were quiet. Cold. Watching.

He made his way to the hidden fissure in the wall—the entrance to the Necropolis. With shaking limbs, he climbed the steps into the abyss, descending again into darkness, guided only by the fragile glow.

He passed the first chamber—Lucius Tullius Zethus's mausoleum—and then froze.

A dim, unnatural light glowed ahead in the furthest chamber. Muffled, echoing sounds reached him.

Heart pounding, Dominic crept along the corridor, the light flickering on damp stone walls.

He peered through the doorway, breath caught.

In the center of a circle of candles on the floor knelt Pope Urbanus VIII—naked, his back raw and bleeding, whipping himself with a frayed scourge. His eyes were glazed, turned onto the wall.

He chanted in Latin, voice low and desperate:

"Lux Lucis, illuminate me, Lucifer, lux inferni!"
(Light of Lights, illuminate me, Lucifer, light of the underworld!)

Dominic's hands shook, the lamp teetering in his grasp.

From the shadows, four cardinals clad in black stepped forward. Their robes were embroidered with occult symbols. They knelt, murmuring dark invocations:

"Nos sumus ministri lucis tenebris – luciferi regni venustas."
(We are the servants of light in darkness – the beauty of Lucifer's kingdom.)

Dominic's breath lodged in his throat. Time fractured. Heart pounding, his skin cold as stone.

He staggered back, nearly dropping the lamp. Silence pressed in.

He fled.

Stumbling up the stone steps, frantic for the ceiling's warmth. Through the crevice. Up into the grottoes. Through the vaults. Out into the night.

His lungs burned as he sprinted toward his chamber, the figure of the Pope's back, streaked with blood, chasing him through his mind.

Inside his room, he slammed the door shut and sank, shaking, against it. The lamp rolled out and clattered against the floor.

He pressed his forehead against the cold wood.

In the dark, he prayed:

"Lord, preserve me. Let me not be tainted by what I have seen. Save me from the abyss below—and from those who worship the darkness above."

His hands trembled. Tears of exhaustion and fear blurred his sight.

Half-crazed, he collapsed, the flickering lamp the only witness.

Dominic paced in his cell, back and forth, his breathing shallow, heart thudding like a drum in his chest. His fingers were cold and numb, lantern long extinguished. Thoughts raced.

"No… no… this cannot be real… But I saw it. I saw it with my own eyes…"

He gripped his hair, hands trembling, pressing his palms into his forehead as though to stop the thoughts. *"The Pope. The Pope…"* He repeated the word as if trying to make it lose meaning.

He thought about fleeing—disappearing into the streets of Rome and never coming back. *This place is too dark. Too cursed.*

But then—

"Bartolomeo… Raimondo… Niccolò… Caterina."

His feet stopped. He turned toward the door. *"I cannot abandon them. Especially Caterina…"*

He thought of her tear-streaked face in the Grottoes, her pain, her vulnerability. He thought of the Silent Brother's unreadable silence. Of Raimondo's faith, of Bartolomeo's strength.

"But how can I serve this Church now?" he whispered aloud. *"How can I serve… the Devil's court?"*

Panic settled on him like frost. He couldn't breathe.

Without thinking, he flung open his door and rushed through the dim halls, robes trailing, bare feet padding against stone. The basilica loomed in shadow as he ran through corridors until he arrived at the monk's dormitory.

He knocked.

Again. Faster.

The door opened. Brother Bartolomeo Danti stood there in his long night tunic, hair messy, eyes bleary.

“Dominic? What in God’s name—”

Dominic pushed in and closed the door behind him. His face was pale, voice a frantic whisper.

“I saw him. I saw *them*. The Pope… Urbanus. In the Necropolis.”

Bartolomeo’s eyes widened.

“What are you saying?”

“He was kneeling… naked, bleeding… worshiping Lucifer. There were cardinals—dressed in black. They chanted in Latin, praising the Light-Bearer… candles on the floor, a ritual.”

Bartolomeo sat down slowly on the edge of his cot, his lips parting but no words coming.

Then, at last, he whispered:

“...So it is true. The deepest rot... It comes from the crown itself.”

Silence stretched. Then he looked up at Dominic with solemn clarity.

“There are three kinds of people in the Vatican,” he said slowly. “Those who live in *blind obedience*. Those who live in *secret truth*… And those who *rule from the shadows*, cloaked in ancient, consuming lies.”

Dominic sat beside him, face in his hands.

“I can’t… I can’t go on like this. How can I serve here, knowing what I’ve seen? I serve a different God than they do.”

“No,” Bartolomeo said, “you serve *the true God*. The One unknowable, beyond this world. They serve the god *of this world*—the Demiurge.”

Dominic looked at him, dazed.

“This changes everything. I am living among enemies. In the midst of devils.”

Bartolomeo nodded slowly.

“Now you understand why the Gnostics were hunted. Why we keep to shadows. We do not kneel before Yaldabaoth, the blind god who created this prison of flesh and stone. We carry the flame—the *gnosis*—in the dark. The true light.”

“And Urbanus? Those cardinals?” Dominic asked.

“They don’t serve the Demiurge… not anymore,” Bartolomeo whispered. “They serve the *light that fell*—Lucifer. The lie behind the lie. The truest heresy is in the throne itself.”

Dominic pressed his fist to his mouth, shaking.

“I thought the Church was lost in doctrine… but this is worse. They have *abandoned* the true light.”

Bartolomeo leaned closer.

“That is why *we* must remain. We who have seen. We who know. We must guard the truth, preserve it, and—when the time comes—*reveal it*.”

Dominic breathed deeply, calming under his friend’s voice. His pulse began to settle.

“So what do we do now?” he asked.

“We continue. Quietly. We listen, watch, read. And we pass the flame from hand to hand. You are one of us, Dominic. A torch in the dark.”

Dominic closed his eyes. The cold fear was still there, but something else now warmed in his chest.

“I will not flee,” he said softly. “I will not let the darkness have this place. I will serve—but not *them*. I will serve the *truth*.”

They sat in silence for a while.

Outside, a wind whispered through the stones of the Basilica.

Within, a secret fire had been lit.

Weeks passed in strained silence.

Dominic carried on his daily routine—scribing, praying, eating—yet his hands trembled at times when copying sacred texts, for his mind was elsewhere. The memory of what he saw in the Necropolis weighed on him like stone. The days were filled with routine. The nights with restlessness.

One evening, as golden light fell low over the Vatican gardens, painting the stone walls in long shadows, Dominic saw **Sister Caterina Farnese** standing alone near the fountain. Her habit moved gently in the breeze, her face turned toward the heavens.

He approached slowly, as if not to disturb the fragile stillness.

"Peace be with you," Dominic said, his voice low and kind.

"And with your spirit," Caterina replied with a soft smile, lowering her eyes humbly.

They began to walk together in silence, the gravel crunching beneath their steps. The air was fragrant with rosemary and fading roses. Above them, the sky melted into twilight, stars blinking through the veil of dusk.

After some time speaking of the gardens—of the flowers, the stillness, the way the light caught on the old marble statues—Dominic’s voice took a solemn turn.

“Caterina… I must tell you something. There is more beneath this place than you know. One night I descended—”

But before he could finish, Caterina stopped walking.

“I know, Dominic,” she said.

Dominic turned to her slowly, brows furrowed, confusion and disbelief flickering across his face.

“You… you know?”

Caterina looked away, her lips trembling. “This was what I wanted to tell you before… but I didn’t know if I should. I’ve been down there, Dominic. They took me.”

Her voice cracked.

“They took me to the rituals. Used me. I don’t remember all of it—some nights I wake up screaming. Others I feel… as if something *entered* me. That night. Since then… dark dreams. Things whispering. Watching me.”

Dominic stood frozen. His jaw clenched. His hands curled into fists.

“I didn’t know,” he said hoarsely. “Caterina… How have you borne this all this time? What have they *done* to you?”

Caterina's eyes filled with tears. They streamed silently down her cheeks.

“I have no one,” she whispered. “My parents are dead. This life… it’s all I’ve ever known. I took my vows thinking I was offering myself to God. But instead…”

Her voice broke. She covered her mouth with her hand.

“I have nowhere to go, Dominic,” she sobbed. “Where would a ruined nun go?”

Dominic reached for her. He took her into his arms gently, protectively.

“You are *not* ruined,” he whispered. “Not by them. Not ever. They are the ruined ones.”

He rested his chin atop her head. “You must leave this place, Caterina. I am going. I cannot stay here. Not after what I’ve seen. Not under *his* rule. This is not God’s house anymore. It is something else.”

Caterina pulled back slightly, looking up into his eyes.

“I want to go too,” she whispered.

Dominic placed his hand gently on her cheek and kissed her forehead, his lips trembling.

“Then we will leave,” he said. “Together, or apart—we will leave this place. One way or another. We will leave tomorrow.”

He turned, walked a few paces, then stopped and looked back at her one last time in the fading light.

Caterina stood still, her tears drying in the wind, but her eyes clear now.

Beneath them, the basilica slumbered, but both knew it dreamed in secrets and shadows.

Before the dawn of escape could rise, there were shadows Dominic had to pass through—brothers to whom he owed more than words could repay. As the late bells of Vespers echoed softly through the halls of the Vatican, Dominic wandered the garden paths, searching.

He found them beneath the fig tree by the northern wall—Brother Bartolomeo Danti, seated as always with his eyes half-lidded in thought, Raimondo Corsi pacing with his hands behind his back, and the silent figure of Fra Niccolò Spina, standing like a statue in his brown robe, hands folded over a small leather-bound note.

Dominic approached them slowly, his face pale in the moonlight.

“I have to go,” he said quietly, voice almost swallowed by the rustle of olive branches above.

Bartolomeo opened his eyes. “Go where, brother?”

“To Jerusalem,” Dominic answered. “This place… I can no longer bear it. What I’ve seen—what we’ve all uncovered—this is no house of God anymore. I must find truth elsewhere. I must find peace.”

There was a moment of silence between them.

Bartolomeo stood and placed a hand on Dominic’s shoulder. “Then you are doing what few have the courage to do,” he said. “Jerusalem still has keepers of the Gnosis. The old line endures there. I will give you a name—Brother Natan’el, he lives in the Armenian Quarter. Seek him. He will know you come from us.”

He pulled a small parchment from the inner fold of his robe and handed it to Dominic. The paper was dry, written in a ciphered alphabet only known to their kind.

Raimondo forced a faint smile. “Maybe we’ll meet again one day. In this world… or in the truer one beyond it.”

Dominic turned to Niccolò, who nodded solemnly, then pressed a folded note into his hand. It bore no name, no mark—only a tiny drawn flame at the corner. Dominic understood. It was a blessing. A farewell. A warning.

They embraced in silence, brothers bound by a hidden truth deeper than any scripture.

Later that night, Dominic returned to his small chamber.

He opened the drawer beneath his cot and pulled out the small linen pouch. Inside were the coins he had saved through years of service—copying scrolls, lighting candles, obeying

orders. He ran his fingers through them once, as if the sound of the metal might anchor him to the reality of what he was about to do.

The candle flickered as he sat on the edge of his bed.

Sleep came in shards. Fragments. Dreams of sand and fire. Of moonlight on olive trees. Of Caterina's tear-streaked face.

By morning, his bag was packed. His heart was full. And his feet were ready to walk the road to freedom.

Holy Land

The next morning, before dawn, Dominic stood quietly in the shadow of the obelisk in St. Peter's Square, clutching a satchel of meager belongings and the pouch of coins he had saved over the years. The square was beginning to stir with the movement of pilgrims, mothers whispering prayers, elderly men leaning on canes, children trailing behind them sleepily. Amid them, a figure in a dark blue cloak emerged from the fog—Sister Caterina Farnese. Her veil was drawn low, and her eyes sought his immediately.

Without a word, they merged with the small crowd. The sound of their sandals against the cobblestones blended with the steps of dozens of others. No one noticed them. No one looked twice.

Step by careful step, they passed beyond the Vatican walls.

Dominic did not look back.

Outside the city gates, they waited at a discreet distance for their arranged transport: an aging mule cart loaded with burlap sacks of lentils and wool. The mule driver, a leathery-skinned man with one eye and a mouthful of curse words, had no interest in questions—especially not from monks and nuns. Dominic handed him a few coins in advance, and they climbed aboard the cart.

The mule groaned, the wheels creaked, and the city of Rome began to fall behind them.

The Via Aurelia, ancient and scarred, stretched northwest toward the coast. It was an old Roman road, still paved in parts with moss-covered stone, broken and mended a hundred times over the centuries. Fields of golden wheat rolled on either side, interspersed with cypress trees and the distant calls of shepherds.

Dominic sat beside Caterina, the morning sun climbing over the hills and warming their cloaked backs. He glanced at her now and then, her eyes fixed on the horizon. She looked as though she had not slept for a lifetime—but there was strength in her silence.

They passed the occasional farmhouse, distant church spires, peasants bent low in the fields. A group of Franciscan friars walked south, singing a morning hymn. Dominic and Caterina bowed their heads as the friars passed. No questions were asked.

The driver chewed something sour and spat frequently, muttering about weather and road taxes.

That night, they camped by a small stream, the mule grazing lazily on thistle. Dominic shared some hard bread with Caterina and offered her his cloak for warmth. They didn't light a fire —it was safer not to.

Under the stars, Caterina finally spoke.

"Do you think there's light in Jerusalem?" she whispered.

Dominic looked up at the stars.

"I think if there's anywhere it might be… it is there."

The next day the air grew salty as they neared the sea. Olive groves thinned, replaced by low scrub and stone walls. The cart's wheels jostled more violently as the road turned to gravel, and in the distance they saw it—Civitavecchia, the port city of the Papal States. Beyond its stone walls, the blue vastness of the Tyrrhenian Sea shimmered like glass.

Dominic's heart pounded. They were almost free.

Caterina reached for his hand under the sackcloth. He held hers firmly.

Tomorrow, they would seek passage by sea.

But for now—they had escaped.

The town was alive with motion—sailors shouting orders, pilgrims haggling with vendors, carts creaking beneath barrels of olive oil, grain, and amphorae of wine. The air was thick with salt, smoke, and the sharp tang of tarred ropes and dried fish.

They found shelter for the night at a weathered tavern near the port, a creaking wooden structure whose sign depicted Saint Peter holding a key over calm waters. The inside smelled of old bread, wet boots, and the faint bite of vinegar. They slept in a small upstairs room, its cot hard but welcome after the sleepless night before.

Dominic awoke before dawn to the sound of gulls screaming over the port. Downstairs, he asked the innkeeper—a leathery-faced woman named Lalle—about ships heading east.

"Pilgrims to the Holy Land, is it?" she asked, eyeing him and Caterina with suspicion. "You're in luck. A French ship—La Vierge de Grâce—is bound for Jaffa. Not many captains are fool enough these days to brave Ottoman waters, but this one… well, he's paid well by men who believe they have God at their back."

Dominic and Caterina arrived in Civitavecchia as the sun began to dip toward the sea, casting long amber shadows across the docks. The town was alive with motion—sailors shouting orders, pilgrims haggling with vendors, carts creaking beneath barrels of olive oil, grain, and amphorae of wine. The air was thick with salt, smoke, and the sharp tang of tarred ropes and dried fish.

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That afternoon, they boarded the La Vierge de Grâce.

It was a stout galley, its sails worn but functional, and a painted Virgin Mary graced the bow, faded by years of wind and spray. The captain, a broad-shouldered Gascon named René de Vallon, squinted at them through a brass spyglass.

“Monks and nuns now, is it?” he grunted. “Fine. But the Holy Sea don’t care what cloth you wear. If you can’t hold your stomach or your prayers, stay out of my crew’s way.”

Dominic nodded. He and Caterina found a spot on the lower deck where other pilgrims huddled with bags of bread, wool blankets, and rosaries clutched tight.

The voyage began the next morning with a blast of the ship's conch horn and a blessing from a pale priest who immediately retired below decks, seasick before the coast vanished from view.

The first three days were calm, if unpleasant. The crew shouted in French and Italian, the sailors sang blasphemous songs at night, and the food was dry crusts and stale water passed around in wooden bowls.

On the fourth day, the sea turned rough. Waves tossed the galley and the pilgrims clung to the railings, praying aloud. Dominic, his face pale and sweating, stumbled toward the edge of the ship and vomited violently overboard, groaning between dry heaves.

“Hold on, Brother,” Caterina whispered, her face pale but calm, holding a damp cloth to his forehead. “It will pass.”

Dominic leaned on the rail, eyes closed. “God deliver us…”

But the storm did not grow worse. Just a day of lashing wind, spray, and nausea, then it faded, leaving the ship bobbing under a dome of endless blue sky.

Days passed.

The food ran low. Fish caught were shared among many, and water was rationed to a few gulps a day. The sun scorched during daylight and the chill bit at night.

Dominic prayed often, sometimes aloud, sometimes in whispers. He and Caterina would sit side by side, not speaking, watching the sun fall into the sea, clinging to hope.

On the fifteenth morning, the shout came down from the crow's nest:

"Terre! Terre devant!"

The port of Jaffa shimmered ahead through the haze. Palm trees, stone walls, and the hazy domes of the ancient land lay waiting.

Dominic and Caterina stood at the rail, clutching hands.

"We are here," Dominic whispered, throat dry, heart pounding. "The Holy Land."

Caterina nodded, eyes full of tears. "Let us find the truth, Dominic. Whatever it may be."

Dominic and Caterina stepped off the ship and onto the sunbaked stones of Jaffa's harbor, their legs unsteady after two weeks at sea. The air smelled of salt, smoke, and spices, the cries of gulls above mixing with the loud, rolling voices of merchants and camel drivers shouting in languages they could not understand.

Jaffa, ancient and eternal, was a maze of weathered stone alleys, flat rooftops, and small market stalls bursting with lemons, olives, dates, brassware, and colorful woven cloths. The sun beat down fiercely, and the travelers moved like ghosts through the crowd, clutching their small bags and robes, eyes wide.

At the edge of a narrow square, they spotted a small inn with faded blue shutters and a wooden sign depicting a palm tree and crescent moon. The inside was dark and cool. Dominic stumbled to a table, barely able to speak.

"Water," he gasped. "Food."

The innkeeper, a heavy-set man with a graying beard, stared at them blankly. Dominic raised his hands, forming a bowl with his palms. "Water," he repeated. "Porridge."

The man nodded, grunted, and disappeared into a back room.

Minutes later, he returned with two clay bowls of hot oat porridge, thick and steaming, flavored faintly with herbs and oil. Dominic and Caterina devoured it in silence, chasing it down with warm water. Relief flooded their limbs as warmth returned to their bodies. It was the first real nourishment they'd had in days.

After resting, they stepped outside into the dust-choked streets. Dominic stopped a young boy, pointed inland and said, “Jerusalem?”

The boy blinked and shouted to a nearby merchant. A grizzled man with a striped scarf came over, eyeing the strangers carefully.

“Jerusalem?” Dominic repeated, pointing inland. “Caravan?”

The merchant nodded, raised one finger. “Tomorrow. Noon. Market.” He mimicked riding a camel, then pointed to the large open square up the road.

Dominic nodded gratefully. “Shukran,” he said, remembering the Arabic word. The man smiled faintly.

They returned to the same tavern to rest, sleeping on thin cots in the corner of a shared room, wrapped in their cloaks. That night, the sounds of donkeys braying, vendors shouting, and distant music lulled them into the first peaceful sleep in days.

At sunrise, they woke, washed their faces at a clay basin, and ate a modest breakfast of bread and figs before heading to the marketplace. The square was alive with activity—carts creaked, camels groaned, goats bleated, and traders bartered in half a dozen tongues. A caravan master, tall and wrapped in flowing robes, barked orders as laborers stacked bundles of textiles, dates, and amphorae onto carts.

Dominic approached and said simply, “Jerusalem.”

The man nodded and held up three fingers. Dominic handed over three silver coins, all he could spare, and the man gestured toward a wooden cart half-covered in canvas.

They climbed aboard, sitting beside a quiet, olive-skinned woman and her sleeping child.

The caravan set off at noon, a slow procession of donkeys, camels, and carts, leaving Jaffa’s bustling stone walls behind and entering the rolling, golden wilderness.

The road was harsh and dry. Dust clung to every surface, and the sun was merciless. They traveled in near silence, broken only by the crunch of wheels on stone and the occasional snap of the caravan master’s stick. Dominic kept his robe tight around him, shading his face. Caterina sat quietly, looking out across the desert hills with eyes that seemed always searching.

They passed low scrub, twisted olive trees, and the bones of ancient watchtowers half-swallowed by the earth. The path climbed steadily, rising into rockier terrain with each hour.

They camped under the stars, drinking goat’s milk and chewing dried figs. In the distance, wolves howled, and the guards sat awake with long spears across their knees.

On the second evening, just as the air began to cool, Jerusalem appeared on the horizon—its stone walls catching the last light of the sun, dome glinting, spires piercing the sky.

Dominic whispered, “There it is…”

Caterina’s voice trembled. “The City of God.”

They sat in silence, staring as the Holy City drew closer, each bump of the cart bringing them nearer to whatever fate awaited within.

The marketplace of the Jewish Quarter bustled as Dominic and Caterina hopped off the caravan cart, legs aching, cloaks clinging to the dust of the journey. The late afternoon sun draped Jerusalem in golden light, casting long shadows through narrow stone alleys and arched walkways. Smoke from cook fires mingled with the sharp scents of spiced lamb, sesame, and citrus in the air.

Though the Jewish Quarter had suffered depopulation in previous centuries, by the 1640s, a modest revival had begun. Sephardic Jews, refugees from Spain and the Ottoman Empire, had begun to trickle back. Their homes and shops were modest stone dwellings, clustered tightly, with Hebrew signs painted faintly above doors. Children chased chickens through the market’s edge, and an old man stirred a pot of lentils beside a clay oven.

Dominic pulled the creased parchment from his sleeve. The name “Brother Natan’el” was scribbled in Bartolomeo’s hand. He glanced around, spotting no immediate direction signs, so they moved cautiously, asking in broken speech and gestures.

“Armenian quarter?” Dominic said to a fruit seller, mimicking a church’s dome with his hands.

The man smiled and pointed down a sloping road, uttering “Qadim... daar!” as if that would help. They followed the direction anyway, stepping through alleys where cobblestones gave way to packed earth, and past quiet courtyards shaded by olive trees.

Jerusalem, they soon realized, was a city of layers—walls upon walls, faith upon faith. The muezzin’s call floated from the east. Bells echoed from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The Armenian Quarter, when they found it, was quieter—fortified, with thick gates and high walls, a stronghold within the Holy City. Monks in long black robes passed without a word, their heads bowed.

After a few more turns and glances at the parchment, Dominic spotted it: a weathered wooden door, sun-bleached and slightly crooked in its stone frame. A carved cross was faintly etched above the lintel. He stepped forward and knocked, the sound echoing faintly into the street.

Moments later, the door creaked open.

The man who answered was tall, thin, and ageless, with a short grey beard, dark eyes, and a soft, deliberate presence. His robes were simple linen, and his sandals worn from many steps.

“I am Brother Natan’el,” he said calmly. His voice was warm, slow like flowing oil.

Dominic bowed. “Brother… Bartolomeo of the Vatican… sent us. I am Dominic. This is Sister Caterina. We are—gnostic brethren.”

Natan’el’s expression didn’t change. He stepped aside silently and gestured for them to enter.

“You are welcome in this house.”

Inside was a modest home, its floor covered with woven rugs, bookshelves carved by hand, and a low table surrounded by cushions. The walls were cool, plastered white. The scent of sandalwood and cardamom hung in the air.

“Sit. Eat,” Natan’el said, disappearing briefly before returning with a wooden tray of dates, warm bread, olives, and lentils. He set down a pitcher of water and small cups.

Dominic and Caterina thanked him as they sat on the cushions, gratefully pulling dates from the bowl.

“We’ve come… not just fleeing,” Dominic began, chewing slowly, “but seeking something true. The Church—” he looked at Caterina, then continued, “—has rotted in the root. We witnessed things. Terrible things.”

Caterina nodded solemnly.

Natan’el listened in silence, then spoke.

“You are not the first to flee corruption, nor will you be the last. Gnosis flows underground, like water beneath dry stone. You have arrived where the well is deep.”

Dominic sat back and exhaled, the weight of weeks finally softening in his chest. Caterina smiled faintly for the first time in days.

“There is a room upstairs,” Natan’el said, standing. “You will rest here. As long as you need.”

They both bowed their heads, and with sticky fingers from the sweet dates, Dominic whispered, “Thank you.”

That night, beneath the scented wooden beams of Brother Natan’el’s home, they slept peacefully—no chants, no screams, no candlelit demons.

Only quiet.